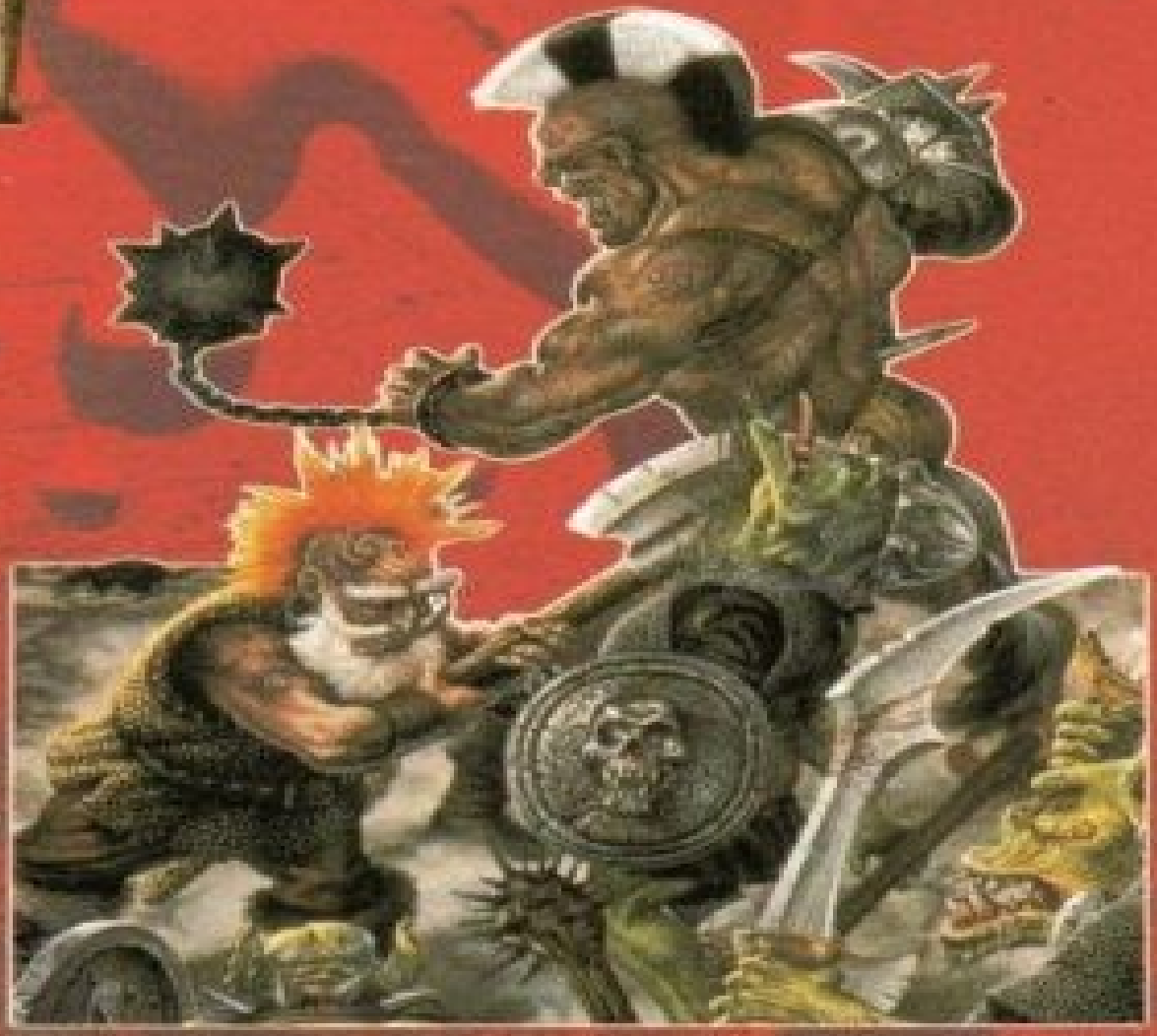
WARHAMMER



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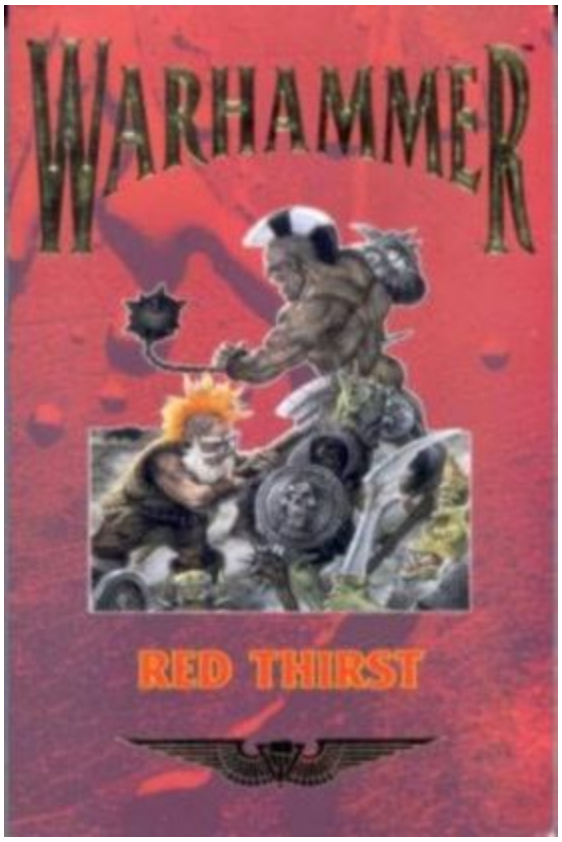

THE OLD WORLD TIMELINE

A brief guide to the history of the Warhammer World

THE WARHAMMER OLD WORLD

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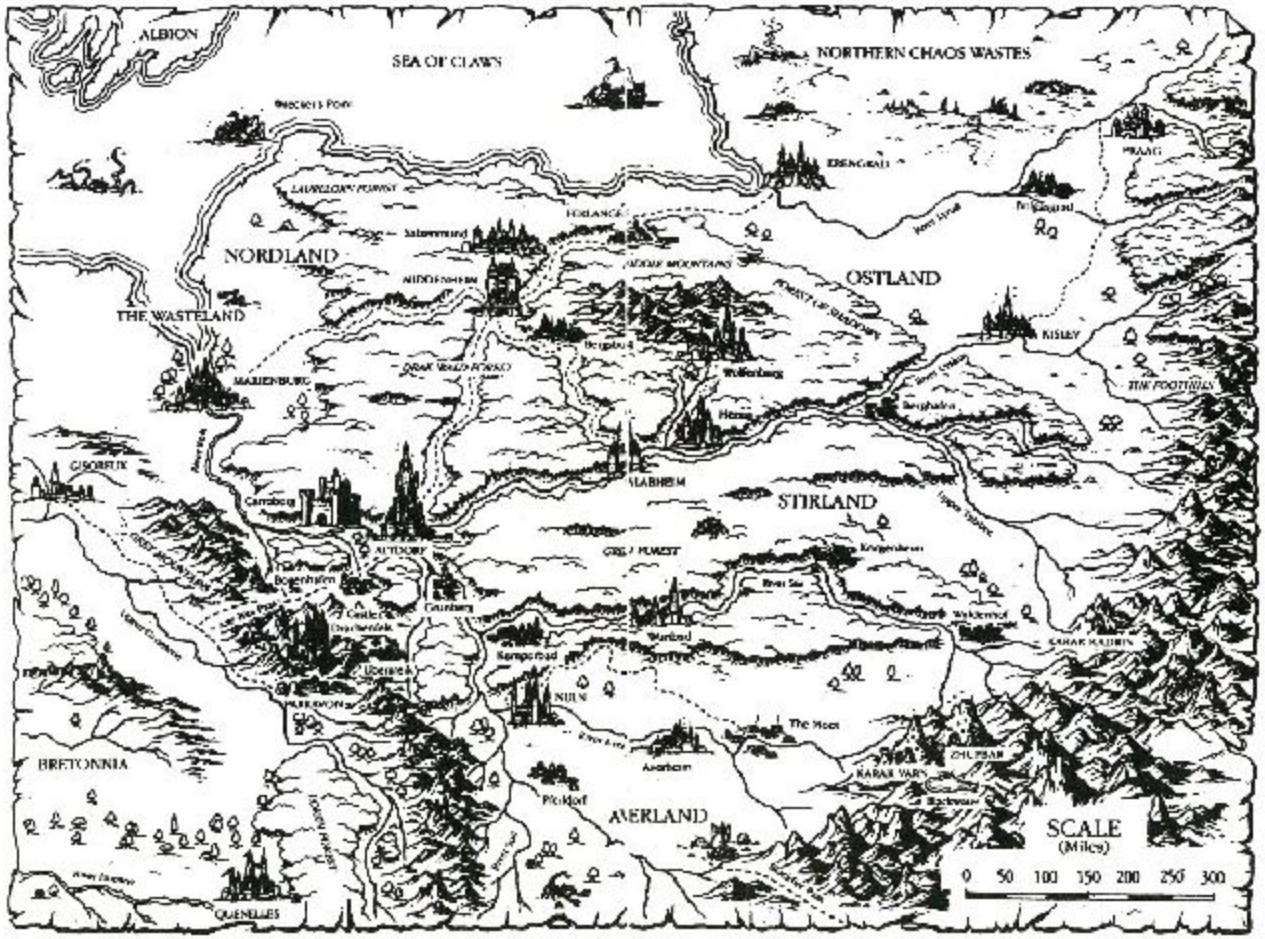

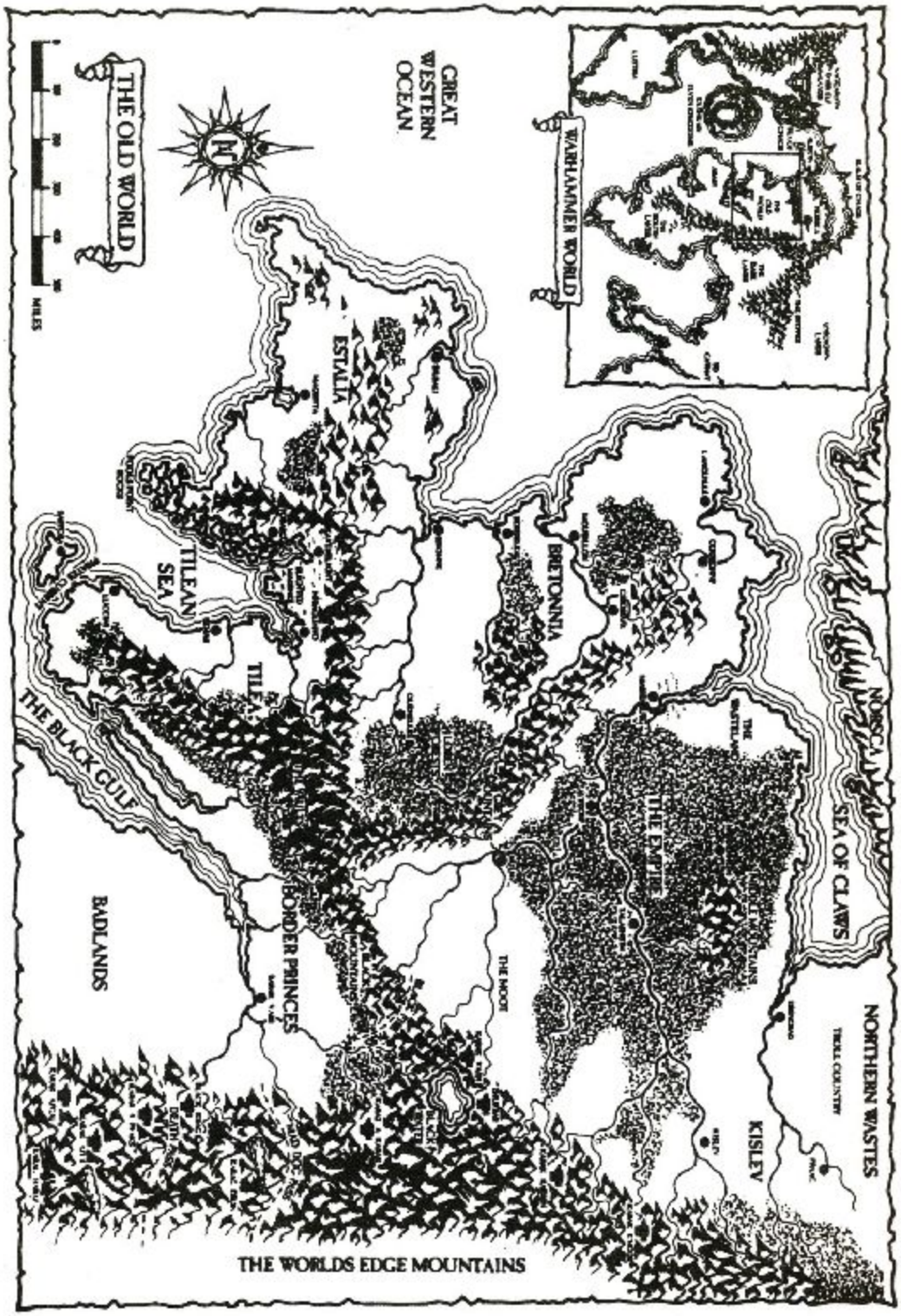
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RED THIRST

by Jack Yeovil

Eventually, Vukotich was awoken by the steady rumbling of the wheels and the clatter of the chains. It was dark inside the closed wagon, but he could tell from the bumpy ride that they weren't in Zhufbar any more. A paved road within the walls of the city wouldn't be as bumpy as this. They were being taken up into the mountains.

He smelled his travelling companions well before his eyes got used enough to the gloom to make out their shapes. There were too many of them to be comfortably confined in the space available, and, despite the mountain cool outside, it was uncomfortably hot. Nobody said anything, but the chains clanked as the wagon lurched over obstacles or swayed from side to side. Someone started wailing, but someone else cuffed him soundly and he shut up.

Vukotich could still feel the blow that had knocked him out. An Acolyte of the Moral Crusade had bludgeoned him with his blessed iron during the arrest, and he supposed from the pains in his chest and legs that the Guardians of Purity had taken the opportunity to kick him thoroughly when he was unconscious. Glinka's blackhood bastards might not be much when it came to knocking back the juice or groping the girls, but they were certainly unequalled champions of unnecessary violence. He only wished he'd been awake when the Company of Killjoys reached for their skullbreakers. He'd been through enough campaigns to learn a little about self-defence.

Like everyone else, Vukotich hadn't at first taken Claes Glinka seriously. He had been hearing a lot lately about this cleric who adhered to no particular god, but called himself the Guardian of Morality, and preached fiery sermons in rural town squares against lasciviousness, in favour of the

sanctity of marriage and lamenting the decline of the Empire's moral values. For Glinka, all the things a man might take pleasure in were steps on the Road to Chaos and Damnation. Then, so swiftly that most people barely had time to react, Claes Glinka had won some measure of Imperial Approval and was the figurehead of a sizeable movement. His Crusade swept through the Old World from town to town, from city to city. In Nuln, he had managed to get the university authorities to close down the Beloved of Verena, a brothel that had been serving the students and lecturers of the city since the days of Empress Agnetha. In the Sudenland, he had supervised the destruction of the fabulously-stocked wine cellars of the Order of Ranald, and seen to the burning of that region's famous vineyards. His agitators worked in the councils of the rulers to change the laws, to enforce prohibitions against strong drink, public and private licentiousness, even sweetmeats and tobacco. Many resisted, but a surprising number, frequently those most known for their own personal laxity, caved in and let Glinka have his way.

Vukotich tested his shackles. His feet were chained to a bar that ran the length of the wagon, inset into the floor. His hands were in manacles, stringing him between the prisoners either side of him. He felt like a trinket on a memento bracelet. The smell got worse as the journey progressed. The wagon made no latrine stops, and some of the prisoners didn't have Vukotich's self-control.

He had come to the fortress city in search of work. His last employment had ended with the rout of Vastarien's Vanquishers by the bandits of Averland. Upon the death of Prince Vastarien, he became free to pledge his sword-arm to another employer, and he had hoped to find a suitable position with one of the warrior aristocrats attending the Festival of Ulric in Zhufbar. The Festival, dedicated to the God of Battle, Wolves and Winter, took place each autumn, to celebrate the onset of winter, and was held in a different city every year. This was where the campaigns against the creatures of darkness were planned, where the arrangements for the defence of the Empire were made, and where the disposition of Emperor Luitpold's forces was decided. It was also the best place for a masterless mercenary to come by a position.

The boards of the wagon's roof were ill-fitting, and shafts of sunlight sliced down into the dark, allowing him to see something of his companions. Everyone was in chains, their feet shackled to the central bar. Most of them

had obvious bludgeon wounds. To his left, stretching the chain between their wrists to its utmost, was a fellow with the oiled ringlets of a nobleman of Kislev, dressed only in britches that had been put on back to front. He was in a silent rage, and couldn't stop trembling. Vukotich guessed he would rather have remained in whoever's bed he had been hauled from. An old woman in well-worn but clean clothes wept into her hands. She was repeating something, over and over, in a steady whine. "I've been selling herbs for years, it's not against the law." Several others were long-term boozers, still snoring drunkenly. He wondered how they'd react when they found out they were about to take the Cure in a penal colony. All human misery was here. And the misery of several of the other higher races too. Opposite were three dwarfs, roped together and complaining. They poked at each other's eyes and grumbled in a language Vukotich didn't know.

Zhufbar had been different this time. Claes Glinka was in town, and had gained the ear of the fortress city's Lord Marshal, Wladislaw Blasko. There were posters up all over the streets, announcing strict laws against gambling, drinking, brawling, dancing, "immodest" music, prostitution, smoking in public and the sale of prohibited stimulants. Vukotich had laughed at the pompously-phrased edicts, and assumed they were all for show. You couldn't hold a Festival for the God of Battle and expect a cityload of off-duty soldiers not to spend their time dicing, getting drunk, fighting, partying, chasing whores, or chewing weirdroot. It was just ridiculous. But the black-robed Acolytes were everywhere. In theory, they were unarmed, but the symbol Glinka had chosen for the Crusade was a two-foot length of straight iron carved with the Seven Edicts of Purity, and those were well in evidence whenever the Guardians attempted to enforce the new laws. On his first morning in the city, Vukotich saw three hooded bullyboys set upon a street singer and batter the lad senseless with their iron bars. They trampled his mandolin to pieces and dragged him off to the newly-dedicated Temple of Purity. Where before there had been ale-holes and tap-rooms, there were now Crusade-sanctioned coffee houses, with in-house preachers replacing the musicians and cold-faced charity collectors rather than welcoming women. On his last visit, Vukotich had found it impossible to walk down the city's Main Gate Road without being propositioned by five different whores, offered a chew of weirdroot for five pfennigs, and hearing twelve different types of street singer and musician

competing for his attention. Now, all he found were tiresome clerics droning on about sin, and Moral Crusaders rattling collection tins under his nose.

The prisoner shackled to his right hand was a woman. He could distinguish her perfume amid the viler odours of the other convicts. She sat primly, knees together, back straight, looking more fed up than desperate. She was young and dressed in immodestly thin silks. Her hair was elaborately styled, she wore a deal of cheap jewellery and her face was painted. Something about the set of her features struck him as predatory, tenacious, hungry. A whore, Vukotich supposed. At least a third of the convicts in the wagon were obvious prostitutes. Glinka's Crusade was especially hard on them.

The first day of the festival had been fine. He had attended the Grand Opening Ceremony, and listened to the speeches of the visiting dignitaries. The Emperor was represented by no less a hero than Maximilian von Konigswald, the Grand Prince of Ostland, whose young son Oswald had recently distinguished himself by vanquishing the Great Enchanter, Constant Drachenfels. After the ceremony, he had found himself at a loose end. Later in the week, he would learn which generals were hiring. But now, everyone was busy renewing old friendships and looking for some entertainment. Vukotich had fallen in with Snorri, a half-Norse Cleric of Ulric he had served with during his time defending Erengrad from the trolls, and they had toured the hostelries. The first few houses they visited were deadly dull, with apologetic innkeepers explaining that they were forbidden by law to serve anything other than near beer and watered-down wine and then only for an absurdly brief given period each evening. There were always hooded Acolytes sitting in the corner to make sure the taverners obeyed Glinka's edicts.

As they stormed out of the third such place, a small fellow with a black feather in his cap sidled up to them and offered, for a fee, to guide them to an establishment that cared little for the Crusade and its restrictions. They haggled for a while, and finally handed over the coin, wherupon Blackfeather led them through a maze of alleyways in the oldest part of the city and down into some disused defence tunnels. Zhufbar had been a dwarfish city originally, and the Norseman had to bend over double to get through the labyrinth. They heard noisy music and laughter up ahead, and their hearts warmed a little. Apart from anything else, they'd be able to

stand up straight. It turned out to be a "Flying Inn," a revelry that moved from place to place two steps ahead of the Crusade. Tonight, it was in an abandoned underground armoury. A band of elven minstrels were playing something good and loud and raucous, while their admirers chewed weirdroot to better appreciate the music. Blackfeather offered them dried lumps of the dream-drug, and Snorri shoved one into his mouth, surrendering to the vividly-coloured dreams, but Vukotich declined, preferring to sample the strong black ale of the city. Girls wearing very little were dancing upon a makeshift stage while coloured lanterns revolved and different varieties of scented smoke whirled. Huge casks were being tapped and the wine was flowing freely, dicers and card-players were staking pouches of coins, and a dwarf jester was making a series of well-appreciated lewd jokes about Glinka, Blasko and various other leading lights of the Moral Crusade. Someone somewhere was making a lot of money from the "Flying Inn." Of course, Vukotich had barely drained his first tankard and started looking around for a spare woman when the raid started...

And here he was, in chains, bound for some convict settlement in the mountains. He knew they'd put him to work in some hell-hole of a mine or a quarry and that he'd probably be dead within five years. He cursed all Guardians of Morality, and rattled his chains.

For once, he had a stroke of luck. His left manacle was bent out of shape, its rivets popped. He slipped his hand free.

Now, when the wagon stopped, he would have a chance.

Once they were out of the city, Dien Ch'ing felt free to pull off his black steeple-hood. This far to the west, the people of Cathay were uncommon enough to attract attention, and so the Order's face-covering headgear was a convenient way of walking about unquestioned. The round-eyed, big-nosed, abnormally-bearded natives of this barbarous region were superstitious savages, ignorant enough to suppose that his oriental features were marks of Chaos and toss him into the nearest bonfire. Of course, in his case, they wouldn't have been entirely unjustified. All who ascended the Pagoda of Tsien-Tsin, Lord of the Fifteen Devils, Master of the Five Elements, had more than a trace of the warpstone in their blood.

A few too many clashes with the Monkey-King's warrior monks had forced him to leave the land of his birth, and now he was a wanderer across the

face of the world, a servant of Tsien-Tsin, an unaltered Acolyte of Chaos, a Master of the Mystic Martial Arts. He had been shepherded through the Dark Lands by the Goblin Lords, and conveyed across the Worlds' Edge mountains to the shores of the Blackwater. There was an Invisible Empire in the Known World, an empire that superseded the petty earthly dominions of the Monkey-King, the Tsar of Kislev or the Emperor Luitpold. This was the empire of the Chaos Powers, of Khorne and Nurgle in the west and north, and of Great Gojira and the Catshit Daemons in the east. Tsien-Tsin, the Dark Lord to whom he pledged his service, was known here as Tzeentch. The proscribed cults of Chaos flourished, and the warp-altered horde grew in strength with each cycle of the moons. The kingdoms of men squabbled, and the Invisible Empire grew ever more powerful.

They made slow progress up into the mountains. Ch'ing sat on his padded seat beside the driver of the second wagon. He was impatient to get this coffle to the slave-pits, and be back about his business in Zhufbar. He had made this run many times, and it was becoming boring. Once they reached the secret caves where the goblins waited, the convicts would be seperated into three groups. The young men would be taken off to work in the warpstone mines of the Dark Lands, the young women sold to the slave markets of Araby, and the remainder slaughtered for food. It was a simple business, and it served the Powers of Chaos well. Always, he allowed the goblins to pick out a woman or two, or perhaps a comely youth, and watched them at their sport. Claes Glinka would be shocked at the ultimate fate of those whose sins he abhorred. Ch'ing laughed musically. It was most amusing.

But this was not the time for amusements. There was important business to be transacted at the Festival of Ulric. There were many high-ranking Servants of Chaos in the city, and they too were plotting strategy. When Ch'ing had been visited in the Dark Lands by Yefimovich, the Kislevite High Priest of Tzeentch, he had been told that the dread one wished him to take a position within the Moral Crusade and do his best to turn Glinka's followers into an army for the advancement of Chaos. Thus far, his subtle strategies had worked well. The Crusade hoods could conceal more than slanted eyes, and Ch'ing knew that many an iron-carrying Acolyte bore the marks of the warpstone under his mask. Glinka was a blind fanatic, and easily duped. Sometimes, Ch'ing wondered whether the Guardian of

Morality had not made his own dark bargain with the Invisible Empire. No one could put aside so many pleasures without a good reason. However, Glinka was just as likely sincere in his passions. All western barbarians were mad to some extent. Ch'ing wondered what it must be like to fear one's own appetites so much that one sought to suppress the pleasures of all the world. To him, thirsts existed to be slaked, lusts to be satiated, desires to be fulfilled.

The sun was full in the sky now. The coffle had been on the road all night. Most of the convicts would still be asleep, or nursing their hangovers. There were three wagons in all, and although the drivers were used to the mountain roads, progress was still frustratingly snail-like. Just now, they were on a narrow ledge cut into a steep, thickly forested incline. Tall evergreens rose beside the path, their lowest branches continually striking the sides of the wagons. There were bandits in the mountains, and worse things, altered monstrosities, renegade dwarf bands, Black Orcs, Skaven, amphisbaenae, mountain bears. But he took comfort; there was unlikely to be anything worse out there than himself. His position on the Pagoda gave him the power to summon and bind daemons, to tumble through the air in combat, and to fight for a day and a night without breaking a sweat.

The first wagon halted, and Ch'ing nudged the driver beside him to rein in the horses. The animals settled. Ch'ing waved to the third wagon, which also creaked to a stop.

"Tree down ahead, master," shouted the Acolyte on the first wagon. Ch'ing sighed with irritation. He could use a simple spell to remove the obstacle, but that would drain him, and he knew the Blessings of Tsien-Tsin would be required soon for other purposes. There was nothing for it but to use the available tools.

Holding his robes about him, he stepped down to the road.

He had to be careful of his footing. It would be easy to take a fall, and wind up bent around a tree hundreds of feet below. The mightiest of warrior magicians always met their deaths through such small missteps. It was the gods' way of keeping their servants humble.

He walked round to the back of the wagon, and unlocked the door. The foul stench of the prisoners wafted out, and he held his nose. Westerners always smelled vile, but this crew were worse than usual.

The convicts cringed away from the light. He knew some of them would be startled by his Celestial face. So be it. They were in no position to be offended.
"Attention," he said. "Those of you who do not assist us in the removal of the tree that blocks our path will have their ears severed. Volunteers?"
The driver yanked at the chain threaded around the central bar of the wagon, and took out the keys. Guards with whips and swords clustered around the wagon. Ch'ing stood back. The central bar was raised, and the convicts were hauled out, their ankle-shackles pulling off the bar like beads from a string. Their feet were free, but they would still be chained wrist to wrist.
First out was the fragile girl he had been warned against. She didn't like the strong sunlight, and covered her eyes. After her was a sturdy young man with more than a few battle scars. Vukotich, he knew. One of the mercenaries. Then, there was a pause, as the half-naked Pavel Alexei hesitated on the lip of the wagon.
Something was wrong.
The whore and the mercenary were shackled together, and the man held his arm up awkwardly, as if chained to the degenerate. But the Kislevite was pressing his hand to his forehead, an empty manacle dangling from his wrist.
Two of the prisoners were loose from the chain.
The mercenary looked him in the eyes, and Ch'ing saw defiance and hatred reflected at him.
He had his hand on his scimitar-handle, but the mercenary was fast.
Vukotich embraced the girl, lifting her up into his arms, and threw himself off the road. The two of them became a ball, and bounced into the woods. Their cries of pain sounded out as they vanished between the trees.
Pavel Alexei, bewildered, tried to follow them, but he was still chained to the next prisoner, and he slipped, dangling from the wagon by his manacled left wrist. Ch'ing sliced with his scimitar, and the Kislevite fell at his feet, leaving his neatly-severed hand in its iron cuff at the end of the chain.
"Anyone else?" he asked mildly. "No? Good."
The cries had stopped. The whore and the mercenary were probably dead down there, but Ch'ing could take no risks.

"You, you, and you," he indicated three guards. "Find them and bring them back."
They stepped off the road, and began to edge their way downwards.
"And take off those hoods," Ch'ing added, "you'll only slip and break your necks."
The guards pulled their hoods back, and followed the path of broken bushes and scraped trees that marked the escapees' route down the mountain. Soon, they were gone.
The Kislevite was whimpering, pressing fingers over his leaking stump.
"Perhaps next time you won't be so keen to share the bed of another man's wife, Pavel Alexei," Ch'ing said.
The Kislevite spat at his shoes.
Ch'ing shrugged, and the driver killed Pavel Alexei with his iron bar. The goblins expected a certain wastage along the road.
Ch'ing pulled out his clay pipe and tamped in some opium from his pouch. He would travel to the Pagoda for a few moments, in search of further enlightenment.
Then, when the guards brought back the whore and the mercenary, he would make sure they were dead, and then the coffle could be on its way again.
Thank the gods, he had not broken any bones in the tumble down the mountainside. But his clothes were ragged, and great patches of skin were scraped from his back and shins. The girl didn't seem greatly hurt either. Too bad. It would have been easier if she were dead. Her silks were torn, her long hair was loose, and she had a few bruises, but she wasn't bleeding.
He hauled her to her feet, pulling on the chain between them, and dragged her through the trees, away from the flattened bush that had broken their roll. It was important to get away from any trail that could be followed. They had gained some time on the guards by their dangerous, headlong descent, but there would be Acolytes after them. A brief exchange of glances with the Celestial in charge of the coffle had convinced Vukotich this was not a man to expect much from in the way of mercy.
"Keep quiet," he told the girl, "do what I say. You understand?"
She didn't look as panicked as he had expected. She simply nodded her head. He thought she was even smiling slightly. She was probably a weirdroot-chewer. A lot of whores were. They sold you their body, but kept

their dreams for themselves. It was much the same with swords-for-hire, he supposed.

He picked their way through the trees, taking care with his footing. It was hard to keep a balance with their wrists chained together. The girl was agile and unfussy, and kept up with him easily. She had a lot of control. She was probably very good at what she did. He wondered whether she were more than a street harlot. More than one great assassin had found a career as a courtesan an efficient way to get close to their targets.

They would be expected to keep going down, so Vukotich took them up, hoping to strike the roadledge a few miles behind the wagons. The Celestial was unlikely to send men back after them, and it would be impossible to turn the coffle round. They should be able to get away if they made it too much trouble to bring them in. Somewhere, there were slave-pits waiting for the convicts, and the Moral Guardians wouldn't want to have three wagonloads of prisoners stranded half-way up a mountain just to bring in a couple of minor carousers. Of course, you could never tell with fanatics...

The girl grabbed his wrist. Their chain rattled. She tugged.

"That way," she said. "There are three men coming."

She was sharp. At first he couldn't hear anything, but then her words were confirmed by clumping feet and huffing breaths.

"They've split up," she said. "One will be here soon."

She looked around.

"Can you climb that tree?" she asked, indicating a thick trunk.

Vukotich snorted. "Of course."

He must be staring at her.

"Now," she said. "Quickly."

He snapped to and obeyed her as if she were a sergeant-at-arms. It was awkward, but there was a stout branch within reach, and he was able to chin himself one-handed. She dangled from the chain, and swung herself up like an acrobat, then hauled him onto the branch. They were both securely perched. He was breathing hard, but she kept her wind.

"Don't be amazed," she said, "I've done this sort of thing before. Lots of times."

He had been staring at her again. She pulled a branch, and they were hidden behind the thick leaves.

"Now," she said. "Be quiet."

They could hear the Acolyte now, blundering around below. He wasn't tracking them properly, just looking at random. They must have found the bush where their tumble ended, and split up in three directions. These bullies were city boys, unused to following people through trails of broken twigs and trampled grass.

Vukotich and the girl both had their hands against the trunk, steadying themselves. He saw the chain hanging between their wrists, and noticed something odd about their shackles. His manacle was plain iron, flecked with odd lumps of some other stuff that sparkled. Hers was different, a padded ring of leather sewn around the metal. He had never seen that before. It looked as if their captors wanted to spare her the discomfort of a chafed wrist, but he couldn't believe Glinka would wish to treat a whore so lightly. More likely, the cuff was designed to prevent her slipping free by dislocating her thumb and pulling her slender hand out of the metal grip.

He guessed her age at sixteen or seventeen. She was slim, but not delicate. She was perfectly balanced on the branch, with an almost catlike ease. In the sunlight, her harlot's paint made her look like a child's doll: white face, red lips, blue-shadowed eyes. She had spoken Old Worlder with a slight accent. Bretonnian, he thought. Like him, she was far from home.

It was a shame, but he would have to get rid of her at the first opportunity. No matter how competent she seemed, chained to him as she was she was as useful to him as an anvil.

The unhooded Acolyte was directly below them now, robes swishing as he looked about. He had a wicked curved sword in one hand, and his bar in the other. He didn't seem to be guarding anyone's purity. He let loose a very un-moral stream of blasphemous oaths. Vukotich could have sworn that the lumps on the Acolyte's forehead were the buds of daemon horns.

Not for the first time, Vukotich wondered if there was something extremely sinister behind Glinka's Crusade.

The girl laid her hand over his, and nodded sharply. He was a beat behind her thinking, but caught up.

Together, they leaped from the branch, and onto the Acolyte. He cried out, but she got her free right hand over his mouth and stifled him. Vukotich looped their chain around his throat, and they both pulled. The Acolyte struggled, but he had dropped his weapons. His hand groped for Vukotich's

face, but he pushed it away. All three fell to the sloping ground, and the Acolyte was pressed beneath them into the mulchy soil.
Vukotich's wrist hurt, but he kept up the pressure. The girl was pulling equally hard. The chain bit into the Acolyte's neck, and his face was red with blood. Noises gargled in his throat. The whore took her hand away from the man's mouth, and Vukotich saw the teeth-bruises in the heel of her palm. She made a fist, and punched the guard's face.
The Acolyte's tongue had expanded to fill his mouth. Blood gushed from his nose. His eyes rolled upwards and showed only white.
The girl drew her forefinger across her throat. Vukotich nodded. The Acolyte was dead.
They disentangled their chain from his throat, and stood up. Vukotich gave a silent prayer to his family totem. Let the blood I have spilled be not innocent. He looked around, and picked up the curved sword. It felt natural in his hand. He had been naked without a weapon.
As he admired the blade, he felt the tug of the manacle, and stuck out his arm, directed by the girl. The swordpoint sank into the chest of the Acolyte who was rushing at them. His was the force behind the killing stroke, but she had provided the aim. He should not have been distracted in the first place. He should have been ready himself to react.
Their hands were entwined around the swordhilt now. They withdrew it from the dying Acolyte, and stood over the bodies. The first had latent horns, the second wolfish teeth. Under the hoods, things were not so pure.
"One more," she said. "No. He's sensed what's happened, and is running away, back up to the road. He'll get help."
Vukotich had to agree with her.
"Downwards," she said. "If there's no pass in the crotch of this valley, there must be a stream. We can follow it."
Vukotich had another priority. He took the sword into his left hand, and looked around. There was a fallen tree. That would do for a chopping block. He dragged her over, and laid the chain on the wood.
"That's useless," she said. "The chain is tempered iron. You'll just blunt the sword."
Nevertheless, he chopped down. The blade turned aside, kinked where it had met the iron links. The chain showed a scratch of clean metal, but wasn't broken.

It was a shame, but...
He pulled her hand, and slipped her sleeve away from her wrist. He looked her in her face.
"I'm a swordsman, and you're a whore," he said. "You can practice your trade without your left hand, but I need my right..."
Red rage sparked in her eyes.
"That won't..."
He struck the blow, and felt a shock that jarred his arm from wrist to elbow. The sword bounced, and scraped against her padded manacle.
"...work."
Incredulous, he looked at her wrist. There was a purple bruise where he had struck, but the skin wasn't even broken. He should have sheared her hand clean off.
She sighed, as if with impatience.
"I told you. You should have listened, fool swordsman."
His left hand felt as if it had been struck with a stone. She took the bent sword out of it as if she were taking a toy from a child, and threw it away.
She shook her left hand, trying to get the pain out of her wrist.
Vukotich noticed he had torn the leather around her shackle. The exposed metal core caught the light, and shone silver.
Silver!
Her eyes were almost completely red now. She smiled, revealing sharp white teeth, needle canines delicately scraping her lower lip.
Iron for him, silver for her. Their captors had known what they were about.
The leech thing took his throat with an unbreakable grip, and leaned across to kiss him.
Genevieve knew she should kill Vukotich, wrench his arm off, and have done with it.
But, vampire or not, she wasn't that sort of girl.
In six hundred and thirty-nine years of more-or-less life, she had been and done a lot of things. Including plenty she wasn't proud of. But she had never been, and wasn't now, a casual murderess.
She'd killed for sustenance, she'd assassinated several people without whom the world was a better place, and she'd killed in combat - the two dead Acolytes lying back there beneath the trees bore witness to that - but she'd never just slaughtered someone because it was the easiest course to take.

Not that she hadn't been severely tempted on many occasions.
Her grip on Vukotich's neck relaxed, and she pushed him away.
"Come on," she told the startled mercenary, her eyeteeth receding into their gumsheaths. "We have to move quickly."
The anger subsided, and her eyes cleared. She still felt the red thirst. But there was no time to bleed the fallen. Drinking from the newly dead wasn't pleasant, but she had done it before. She would have been more worried that there would be warpstone in the Acolytes' blood. She was immune to most diseases, but the caress of Chaos wasn't like plague or the fevers. Her natural defences might not be enough to keep her whole with that stuff inside her.
She jerked him to his feet, and led him downwards. Unlike the traditional melodrama heroine, she was highly unlikely to twist her ankle and become a nuisance for her big, brave protector. She was able to sense the root-holes and low shrubs that might trip them up.
She had been right. They came to a shallow stream that ran fast downwards. It must eventually feed into the Blackwater. If they followed it, they would find a settlement. She hoped it would be one with a blacksmith who held a very low opinion of Claes Glinka's Moral Crusade. If not, it would mean resorting to force and terror, and she was tired of that. She had come to Zhufbar to get away from her reputation for great deeds, and she did not relish another brush with the makings of songs and folktales.
She tugged the chain, and her padded manacle shifted. She felt a sharp sting as the exposed silver pressed against her flesh, and let out a pained hiss. She twisted the manacle, and the burning stopped, but the metal still gleamed white.
She took a handful of mud from the stream, and gave it to Vukotich.
"Smear this on the tear," she said. "Please."
He took the mud and, without questioning her, applied it to the manacle like a healer putting a poultice on a wound.
"Thank you," she said. She took a large leaf and stuck it over the mud, tightening it around the leather. It would dry and fall off eventually, but for now it would protect her.
"Don't worry," she told him. "I'm not going to drain you dry at a draught. Not that I wouldn't be justified after your amateur attempt at surgery."

She rubbed her wrist. The bruise was already fading. He had nothing to say. He wasn't even sheepish.
"Come on," she tugged again. They jogged along the stream, feet splashing in the water. He was wearing heavy marauder's boots, while she only had dancer's slippers.
"But ..." he began.
She was ahead of him. "Yes, I know. Running water. Vampires aren't supposed to be able to cross it."
He nodded, exerting himself to keep apace with her.
"That holds true only for the Truly Dead. They're the ones who can't stand religious symbols or garlic or direct sunlight. I'm not one of those. I never got around to dying."
He wasn't the only one who didn't know much about vampires. Glinka's vigilante squad had come for her with wreaths of garlic around their necks, bearing enough medals of Shallya and Verena to slow them down considerably. One of her "clients" must have informed on her. They came to her room in the East Wall Hostelry just after sun-up, when she would normally be sinking into her daytime doze, and found her with Molotov, an official from the Kislevite delegation to the Festival of Ulric, delicately tapping his throat. They had silver scythes and hawthorn switches, and soon had her bound and helpless. She had expected to feel the prick of a stake against her ribs, and for it all to be over.
Six hundred and thirty-nine years wasn't a bad run for her coin - it was more than Chandagnac, her father-in-darkness, had managed - and she had at least the feeling, since the death of Drachenfels that she had done something worthwhile with the length of her life. But they had just chained her and kept her.
Vukotich was coughing and spluttering now, his human lungs exhausted by their pace, and she slowed down. She could not help but be amused at seeing the warrior so helpless, so easily outstripped by someone who must seem to him like a little girl. This would pay him back for her wrist, and prompt him to go less by appearances in the future. He was in his thirties, she supposed, solidly built and with a good crop of battle-scars. There was a simple strength to him. She could feel it in his aura. If there was time, she would like to bleed him, to take some of his strength.

The Tsar's man had been dissolute, his blood too sauced with stinging vodka and weirdroot juice. Molotov had been a poor lover too, a disappointment all round. She had been working the Festival, paid by Wulfric, Master of the Temple of Ulric, to go with visiting dignitaries the Cult wished to sweeten up. She was being paid a little extra for any sensitive military information she might happen upon in the course of her duties, but so far the diplomats and generals from outside the Empire had been more interested in boasting of their achievements on the battlefield or in the boudoir than in talking about fortifications and siege engines. Whore-cum-spy wasn't the most noble of her many professions, but it was better than being a barmaid. Or a heroine.

The stream was rushing swift about their feet now. They would have to watch out for waterfalls. They had descended to the foothills. As far as she could tell, there were no Acolytes on their track. She hoped that Dien Ch'ing had given up on them, but somehow she knew that was too much to ask the gods.

She had seen the Celestial before. At the opening ceremony of the Festival, when the Acolytes of the Moral Crusade doffed their hoods for the singing of the sacred songs of Ulric. She had travelled in the Orient, spending a century sailing between Great Cathay and the islands of Nippon, and knew more about the East than most of the inward-looking citizens of the Old World. Yellow faces were unusual in the Empire, and Ch'ing's must be unique among the followers of Glinka. She had planned to mention him to Wulfric when next she gave her report. She could sense powerful magics about him. Not the familiar enchantments of the Empire's wizards and witches, but the subtler, more insidious spells she had learned to fear in the east. Master Po, with whom she had shared three decades, had taught her a little of the magic of Cathay. She barely had her foot on the Pagoda, but she could recognize one advanced many levels towards the apex. Ch'ing was a dangerous man, and he was no Moral Crusader.

Vukotich stumbled and fell. She dragged him a few yards, and pulled him out of the water. He lay exhausted, breathing heavily. Impatient, she sat beside him, and tried to feel her way back into the woods. No one was following them.
For the moment, they could afford to rest.
The bloodsucker told him her name. All of it. Genevieve Sandrine du Pointe du Lac Dieudonne.
"Yes," she said at his involuntary start of recognition, "that one."
"The vampire in the songs of Brave Oswald?"
She nodded in irritated confirmation.
"You killed Drachenfels."
"No. I was there, though. Unconscious. I missed the big battle."
Vukotich couldn't understand. Being this near to the unhallowed creature appalled him, made him want to puke his guts, but he was as curious as he was disgusted.
"But what are you doing..."
"As a whore? It's nothing. I've been a pit fighter in my time, and you wouldn't want to give that as your profession to a census taker. I've swept stables. And I've been a slave... in Araby and the Dark Lands. That's one thing about living forever. You get to try everything."
Vukotich found it difficult to reconcile this bedraggled, street-fighting little girl with the glamorous immortal in the songs.
She seemed distracted, annoyed about something. She could stand him trying to chop off her hand, but she didn't like being forced to tell him who she was. She wasn't what he expected of the undead. Those he had met before had been foul-smelling monstrosities of Chaos, vermin to be captured, staked, beheaded and forgotten. He mustn't let this one's almost human appearance fool him. Appealing or not, this was a woman-shaped piece of filth. In this world, there were natural things and there were monsters. Genevieve was a monster.
Biting down on the words, he asked, "but... well, you must be a heroine of the Empire?"
She spat in the stream. Her phlegm was threaded with blood.
"Yes, but sometimes heroines are embarassing, you know. Especially if they live forever and drink blood. I got fed up with being surrounded by politely

terrified officials who thought I was going to go for their throats at any moment."
"And Prince Oswald?"
"He's not like the songs, either. No one ever is. I met Magnus the Pious once, and he tried to put his hand up my dress."
She was distracted, thinking of her Prince. He supposed the man must have used her and bested her. She was fetching, but she was a dead thing, an instrument of Evil. Vukotich had killed several of her like in his campaigns.
But she could have her uses. Vampires, as he had seen, were unnaturally strong. With a crafty grin, he held up his manacled hand.
"Did you think I hadn't thought of that?" she said. "I tried back in the wagon. Look."
She held up her left hand. The fingertips were burned.
There was something mixed with the iron of his shackles. "Silver," she said. "Not enough to weaken the links, but enough to be uncomfortable for me."
"So," he sneered, "your powers haven't done us any good at all really."
Her eyes fired again. "Not much, they haven't. How do you suppose your other manacle, the all-iron one, got broken?"
She made a fist, and Vukotich imagined the iron cracking in her grip.
They still had shackles around their right feet, dangling the chains that had been threaded to the bar in the wagon. Fortunately, one silver cuff had been enough expense for the Guardians of Morality. She prised her own anklet apart and dropped it in the stream.
"I should just let you drag that thing, shouldn't I?"
Vukotich didn't ask for help. With a gesture of exasperation, Genevieve bent over and freed him. The crack of breaking metal was as loud as a pistol shot.
By now, the hammering inside Vukotich's chest had died down.
"Can you go on? I can carry you if you can't, although, as I'm sure you'll understand, I'd rather not... "
"I can walk," he told her, his cheeks reddening. She pulled him upright. By the sun overhead, he judged it to be nearly noontime, and he was getting hungry. And thirsty.
With a chill, he wondered if Genevieve were feeling the same.
Although direct sunlight didn't affect her as it would one of the Truly Dead, Genevieve felt a growing lassitude. It was a clear autumn afternoon and

unclouded sunlight filtered down through the tall, straight trees, and fell heavily upon her. Her eyes were watering, and she wished she had the smoked glasses she usually wore by day. They were left with the rest of her things in the East Wall. Her exertions had tired her, and she could no longer outstrip Vukotich with ease. The mercenary was tiring too, and they had continually to lean on each other for support. Their chain was a nuisance.

Vukotich was an intolerant man, and instinctively disliked vampirekind. That was not uncommon. Master Wulfric, who was only too pleased to make use of her to further the ends of the Empire, was much the same: have her risk her life for the Greater Glory of Ulric, but don't invite her to sit at your table, don't let her go to a coffee house with your son, don't encourage her to worship at your Temple. She'd had over six hundred years of wandering from place to place, leaving stake-waving, garlic-smeared, silver-scythed would-be monster killers behind her. Almost all of them were dead now, left behind by the years. But she took scant comfort from that.

The trees were thinning, and afternoon turned to evening. She could feel her senses sharpening, and now she was propping up Vukotich, pulling him onwards, her full strength returning. And with the strength came the red thirst. Her teeth hurt as they shifted in her jaw, and her mouth filled with blood-threaded saliva. Soon, she must feed. She heard Vukotich's strong heartbeat, and felt the steady, even circulation of his blood. His distaste for the act might add some spice to it... But she wasn't desperate enough yet to bleed an unwilling partner.

For a few miles, the woods had been different. There were treestumps bearing the marks of axe and saw, well-trampled pathways, old bones, and discarded food wrappings. Above the trees, the smoke of several chimneys combined into a spectral twister which dispelled into the sky.

"There's a village up ahead," she said.

They stopped, and tried to do something about their chain. Vukotich was wearing a long-sleeved leather jerkin and was able to wrap most of the chain around his forearm then pull the sleeve down over it. They had to hold hands like young lovers, their fingers entwined.

"Now, this is going to be uncomfortable," she said, "but if I put my arm around your waist, under your jerkin, and you twist your arm backwards..."

Vukotich winced. Genevieve wondered if he wasn't hurt inside from the fall or the fight.

"There."
Together, they strolled towards the village, not exactly convincing as a woodsman and his girlfriend out for an evening in the forest, but not exactly obvious as runaway convicts either.
It was a small settlement, a few peasant dwellings clustered around a hillock, upon which stood a nobleman's hunting lodge. There were fires in a few of the houses, but the lodge was dark. It must be between seasons.
Genevieve guessed they might be in luck. Where there were huntsmen, there would have to be a good ostler's and a good smithy.
It was full night now, and her blood was racing. But she would have to restrain herself. They couldn't deal with a blacksmith at night. They would have to sound out the villagers first, win the smith over by stealth, and make sure that they weren't in a nest of Glinka's moralists.
"Let's find a woodshed," Vukotich said. "Maybe there'll be tools."
Genevieve hadn't thought of that. Vukotich could probably swing a hammer as well as any smith.
She felt a chill. She was alerted to some danger. She put her forefinger over Vukotich's mouth.
There were people coming out of the woods. Genevieve heard armour creaking. Armed men.
They saw lanterns approach, and heard people talking. The Acolytes must be searching the area.
But surely they weren't important enough to warrant this much time and these many men?
The lanterns came out of the woods, and a small group of men-at-arms emerged, trudging into the village. They were being directed by a sergeant on horseback. He bore a familiar crest on his helmet, that of the Blasko family, and his breastplate was decorated with the mailed fist symbol of Zhufbar. Genevieve had seen soldiers dressed like this in the city. They were with the Lord Marshal's elite personal guard.
Escaped felons or not, Wladislaw Blasko was unlikely to be concerned about a couple of offenders against public morals.
The soldiers were conducting a house-to-house search. Doors were pulled open, and the peasants quietly stood aside to let the men look around. Blasko's guards were efficient and polite. They were careful not to break anything. They didn't seem to be searching for anyone or anything in

particular. From the way the soldiers and the villagers acted, she guessed that this was a familiar procedure. The sergeant even took the time to sweet-talk a middle-aged woman who brought him a goblet of wine.
The wine was a good omen. None of Claes Glinka's foul coffee for these men. The Crusade had not taken hold here.
Genevieve pulled Vukotich into an alley between buildings, not too quietly. She felt his body tense, and knew he was expecting a fight.
"Relax," she told him. "They're not here for us."
But they had been noticed.
"Who's over there?" shouted the sergeant. A soldier fast-walked across the roadway to investigate, his lantern jogging.
Genevieve put her free hand up to Vukotich's face and kissed him. He squirmed, and tried to protest, but then realized what she was trying to do. He went limp in her embrace, not resisting, not reciprocating.
Tasting him, she felt the need for blood.
The lantern was shone at them, and they looked, blinking, at the soldier.
The man-at-arms laughed, and turned away. "It's all right, sir," he shouted. "Courting couple."
"Lucky devils," said the sergeant. "Leave them alone. We've plenty more forest to sweep."
The lantern was taken away. Vukotich went tense again, and Genevieve put her hand on his chest, restraining him. She felt his heart beating fast, and realized her nails were growing longer, turning to claws.
She regained control, and her fingerknives dwindled.
Vukotich was bleeding slightly, from the mouth. She had cut him when they kissed. A shudder of pleasure ran through her as she rolled the traces of his blood around her mouth. She swallowed, and felt warm.
The mercenary wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked at her in disgust.
Soon, she must feed. It was more than a physical need. It was a spiritual desire. The red thirst wasn't much like the simple need men and women felt for water. It had more in common with the acute craving of the far-gone weirdroot addict, or the lusts of the libertine.
The soldiers had gone now.
"We must find somewhere for the night," he said.

She was irritated, but saw the sense. She was off her best in the day, but could still keep moving. He needed to sleep. They would have to proceed to his advantage for the moment.
"The lodge. No one's using it."
Slowly, their bodies pressed together, they made their way up to the hunting lodge. It wasn't especially large or luxurious, but it was better than a floor of pine needles, a roof of sky and a quilt of leaves.
They didn't even need to break in. There was an unfastened window at the rear. Inside, the lodge was one large room, carpeted with furs, with a sleeping gallery running around the ceiling. Hunting trophies hung on the walls.
Vukotich found a bottle of wine and unstoppered it, drinking deep. He offered it to her, but she declined.
With some awkwardness, they climbed the ladder to the gallery, and found a corner where, under some furs, Vukotich could sleep. He finished the bottle, and passed out.
Genevieve sat, her arm outstretched as Vukotich curled into a protective position, and let the night go to waste.
Vukotich dreamed of the Battle at the Top of the World. He had had these nightmares since childhood, and the Strega of his village tried many times to read in them intimations of his future. In these dreams, his body was unfamiliarly heavy and hurt, not with the wounds of combat but with the weight of years. On a vast plain, where his breath turned to ice in the air, he found himself amid a conflict in which all the races of the Known World fought apparently at random. Hideously altered creatures clashed in purposeless jousts, many shades of blood darkening the ground. They were all knee-deep in the bones of the fallen. In the darkness, Vukotich fought...
Then, he was awake. The vampire was close, her hand over his mouth. Annoyed, he made fists. Did she think he was a child who cried out in the night?
There was light in the lodge, and he could hear voices.
Genevieve's face loomed over his. With her eyes, she directed his attention.

There were people in the lodge, standing around a blazing fire.
"He will be here soon?" asked a tall, completely bald man in ceremonial armour edged with purple silks and wolfs fur.
A robed and hooded figure nodded.
The bald man paced impatiently, a goblet clutched in his hand. From his bearing, Vukotich could tell that this was a man unused to being kept waiting, a man of power. Vukotich was sure he had seen the man before, perhaps at the opening ceremony of the Festival of Ulric, along with all the other generals and barons and imperial heroes.
Genevieve mouthed a name, and Vukotich caught it. Blasko.
Vukotich looked again. Yes, it was Wladislaw Blasko, the Lord Marshal of the fortress city. Also, the man who had allowed Claes Glinka's crusade to take hold, who had let Zhufbar's famously riotous wine palaces be turned into glum coffee houses with religious tracts on every table and cold ashes in the hearths.
Blasko drained his goblet at a gulp, and held it out for an attendant to refill. The glowing purple liquid certainly wasn't Glinka's Lustrian coffee.
As Blasko paced, the robed figure stood as still as a devotional statue. He wore the hood of a Moral Crusader, but there was something strange, almost inhuman, about his bearing. Although his head was bowed, he stood a full hand's breadth taller than the Lord Marshal, and his elbows seemed to bend the wrong way. Vukotich guessed that whoever was underneath the hood had a touch of the warpstone.
Morality and mutation. These were strange partners, Vukotich understood now why there had been soldiers in the village. The Lord Marshal was the commander of Zhufbar, and Zhufbar was a key link in the chain of fortresses that stretched from Karak-Ungor in the icy north down the Worlds' Edge mountains to Karak-Azgal in the volcano-blighted south. These were the only line of defence against the Dark Lands, where the goblin hordes still ruled, where daemons raged, where schemes were laid against humanity. Such an important man does not go anywhere without making sure no assassins lie in wait. If they survived this escapade, Vukotich would suggest that Blasko engage some new elite guards. His current crop had been easily fooled. Were he and the vampire bitch out to win favour with the Proscribed Cults, they could easily kill the Lord Marshal from their hiding place, and maybe an Empire would totter a little.

A group of newcomers arrived, bringing with them a chill blast of night air, and a few traces of mist. Blasko was pleased that his wait was over.
"Hah," he said, "good! Comrade, some wine?"
The chief of the newcomers, robed like the tall figure, shook his head. Blasko had his own goblet refilled again.
The two robed men exchanged bows and gestures, communicating in ways Vukotich did not understand.
The newcomer, whose black robes were edged with discreet scarlet, broke off his silent conversation, and turned to Blasko.
"I am Yefimovich," he said, pulling off his hood.
Blasko spluttered his drink, and stepped back. Vukotich felt a rush of terror, as Yefimovich's inner fires spread red light up into the gallery.
He was like a living statue of transparent glass, perfect in every detail, filled with fire. Eyes like black marble peered out of his infernal face, and he smiled.
His robes fell away from his blazing hands, and he clapped Blasko on the shoulder. Vukotich expected the Lord Marshal to burst into flames, but although he flinched he was unharmed. With fascination, he gingerly laid his hand over Yefimovich's, and suffered no hurt.
"Our dark masters demand strange sacrifices, Wladislaw," the fiery man said.
Yefimovich spoke Old Worlder with a Kislevite rasp.
"Will I...?"
Blasko was unable to finish his question.
"Undoubtedly," Yefimovich replied. "Something will be required of you. You must learn to leave your preconceptions about physical form behind. This might seem quite a startling condition, but it is surprisingly pleasant. With the changes of the warpstone come certain improvements. With strange sacrifices come strange rewards. It is different for each soul, Wladislaw. Who knows what is locked within your heart?"
Blasko turned away. His goblet was empty again.
Yefimovich's still-masked lieutenant walked across the room, swaying slightly. Underneath his robes, his limbs moved the wrong way. He must have more elbows and knees than was natural. Vukotich was thankful that this horror was decorously covered.

Always, the marks of Chaos had filled him with a fear that made him detest himself. He had killed many of these warp-spawn, but he could never kill his dreams. The Battle at the Top of the World still waited for him each night.

"Things are well, I trust?" Yefimovich asked.

Blasko didn't look at the fiery man, but he replied. "Yes. I have made the arrangements for the closing ceremony of the festival."

"Glinka will speak?"

"He will preach. On the shores of the Blackwater, there will be a gathering of all the representatives. Glinka will call for the Emperor to embrace his Moral Crusade..."

Yefimovich laughed, nastily. "Then he will die?"

"Yes. The man you sent me will carry out the assassination. Glinka's wizard advisers are interested only in orthodox magic. The Celestial has methods unfamiliar to them."

"Excellent, excellent. You are well placed to succeed to the position of power within the Crusade?"

Blasko gulped more wine. "Of course, of course. My trusted aides already outnumber Glinka's people on the inner councils of the Temple of Purity. I shall be appointed in his stead."

Yefimovich's face flared into a grin. "And as the power of the Crusade grows, so shall the influence of our Invisible Empire. There is an amusing irony, don't you think, in our taking advantage of a campaign against sin?"

Blasko didn't say anything. He was sweating. Vukotich noticed that the attendant who brought him his wine was bone-white with terror. They weren't all monsters. Yet.

Genevieve was intent on the conversation, her brows knitted. Vukotich wondered where her sympathies would lie. As a monster, she must have some affinity with Yefimovich and his like. But she had campaigned against Drachenfels, the Great Enchanter. She wasn't like the other creatures of darkness he had encountered.

Yefimovich embraced the quivering Blasko and kissed him on the mouth, obviously enjoying the Lord Marshal's discomfort. Vukotich remembered how he had felt in Genevieve's cold embrace, feeling her razor teeth against his lips.

"Tzeentch willing, we shall meet again in three days, Wladislaw," said the monster, "after the ceremony. I shall look forward to your elevation. As our friend from the east might say, you are to climb the Pagoda..."

With his robed comrades, Yefimovich left. Blasko turned to his attendant, and wiped his lips. Vukotich remembered the sweet taste of Genevieve, the shameful moment when he had felt aroused by her, felt a desire for her to continue the dark kiss...

The attendant was crying now, almost gibbering with fear.

Blasko was in a cold fury, trying to purge himself of his rage. He looked around for something to hurt.

"Stop that whimpering, Meyyes," he snarled.

The attendant, no more than a lad, fell to his knees, and began to pray to Shallya for forgiveness.

Blasko threw the dregs of his goblet into the fire, and looked for a long moment into the flames. The attendant kept praying, his pleas to the goddess interrupted by sobs.

The Lord Marshal turned round, a dagger in his hand, and shut Meyyes up.

He kicked the corpse, and left the lodge.

As he did each morning, Dien Ch'ing cast the yarrow sticks. Something about the configuration disturbed him. This close to the assassination, he was liable to fuss over details, to take additional precautions. He was still in an ill humour over the pair who had escaped from the coffle yesterday. They weren't important, but they were a flaw in the tapestry of his life, and if he were to neglect such things the whole fabric would come apart.

He uncrossed his legs and stood up. His cell in the Temple of Purity was bare of all decoration, but there was an exquisitely carved trunk under his cot. It was the only thing he had brought with him from Cathay, and it had been blessed by a High Priest of Tsien-Tsin with a blood sacrifice.

Reciting the words of restraint, he opened the trunk. If he were to stray by so much as a syllable from the ancient ritual, he knew his heart would burst in his chest. Tsien-Tsin demanded perfection.

From among the other magical implements, Ch'ing drew out a shallow, unpatterned bowl. He set it on the flagstone floor, and filled it with water from the jug by his cot. Then, he added three drops of jaguar oil from a phial he found in its slot in the trunk. He slipped a thumb into his mouth

and sank his teeth into the fleshy part, piercing the skin. He squeezed out precisely three drops of his blood, and set the bowl spinning.
The oil and the blood swirled in the water, clouding it over. Ch'ing focused his mind, trying to see the Pagoda in the water, its lower levels strewn with lotus and chrysanthemum, its upper levels decorated with the bones of those who had failed Tsien-Tsin.
Music was forbidden within the Temple by order of Claes Glinka, who claimed that even the most devotional air was an invitation to lewd behaviour. But Ch'ing heard the orchestra of the Fifteen Devils playing on the Pagoda. For a moment, he was melancholy for the land of his birth.
He gave the bowl another spin, and it revolved as if on an axis like a potters' wheel. The impurities in the water collected around the rim, and the bowl became a window.
Ch'ing saw a hunting lodge in the forests, first from the outside, then from within. He nodded to himself. This was where Wladislaw Blasko and High Priest Yefimovich should have met last night, to discuss the work of the Proscribed Cults. The window was high up in the lodge, and Ch'ing saw Blasko and Yefimovich talking silently below.
What was wrong with this picture?
The conspirators were not alone. Ch'ing cursed Blasko's western wizards and their lack of true vision. The Lord Marshal should not have, need not have, allowed his business to be overheard.
There were two of them, in the gallery, listening attentively to things that were not their concern.
The window sank towards the eavesdroppers, and Ch'ing recognized them. The vampire and the mercenary. He included himself in his curses. This would not have happened had he not been careless.
The bowl slowed, and the window closed. He was simply staring at a bowl of water.
The Celestial thought things through. He could not admit his mistake to Blasko, lest he be replaced as assassin. It was important to Tsien-Tsin that he, and not some feeble initiate necromancer of Nurgle, deliver the Moral Crusade into the hands of the Chaos Lords. If he were to step aside, his bones would adorn the Pagoda.
Genevieve and Vukotich must be found, and silenced.

He took a bamboo flute and blew a silent note, conjuring the spirit of a humble ancestor who had been buried under the tree which provided the wood for the instrument. Ancestor Xhou formed in the air, and he despatched the spirit at once to harry the pair.

Then he set out to perform his devotions for the Crusade.

They had stolen an ox-cart, and were on the road to the Blackwater. It was as good a direction as any, considering that to the east were the Dark Lands, to the south the Blood River and the Badlands, and to the west the Black Mountains. What they had learned last night troubled Vukotich a little, but it was really none of his concern. Like Genevieve, he had no especial cause to wish to protect Claes Glinka from his enemies. He was not a citizen of the Empire, and he was not currently sworn to serve anyone. If the Crusade of Purity were to be infiltrated completely by the proscribed cults, then it could hardly inflict any more damage than it was already wreaking in its intended form. Until someone paid him, this was not his fight. And Genevieve, he suspected, stood to profit from the encroachments of Chaos. Surely, her filthy kind would be more likely to be tolerated if the likes of Yefimovich were to rule over the Old World.

Their best plan was still to find a smithy, and go their separate ways. Vukotich could certainly breathe easier without the leech girl as an anchor.

They had found some rag blankets in the cart, and wrapped them around themselves. Genevieve was dozing now, her head against his shoulder, the blanket tight over their shackles. He held the reins in his left hand and let the ox do the work. They were supposed to be an old peasant couple. They had met no one on the road worth lying to.

If Blasko's followers were to come to power in the fortress cities, they would be able to betray the Worlds' Edge defences to the goblin hordes. There would be wars. Noble houses would be set against each other. The Empire's armies would clash with the forces of Chaos. Kislev, Bretonnia and Estalia would have to pitch in. Everyone would have to take sides. There would be plenty of work for a mercenary. A war would be good for business.

But still Vukotich remembered his dreams. There was little honour, glory or profit in his nightmare of battle.

Cloaked in the robes of Purity, the inhumans could get close to the Emperor himself, could all but take over the Empire. Maybe there would be no great

fields of combat, only a series of treacheries, betrayals and ignoble victories.
The cart trundled across a crossroads. There was a sturdy gallows built there. A dead dwarf hung from the rope, flies swarming on his face.
They were getting near civilization again.
Genevieve was awake, her fingers digging into his side.
"There's something dead here."
"Just a sheep thief," he told her.
"No. His spirit is gone. Someone else remains. A foreign spirit, from a very great distance..."
There was a miniature explosion in the air, and something took shape. It was indistinct, and it flew as fast as a hummingbird. It danced above the ox's head.
Genevieve threw back the blanket, and made some passes in the air with her hands. Vukotich's right hand had gone to sleep. It dangled under hers from their chain.
"I'm not very good at this. I've never been much of a spellslinger."
The spirit settled, and became a small old man in patterned golden robes, sitting cross-legged in the air over the ox. He had long fingernails and stringy moustaches like the Celestial's.
"Greetings, honoured ones," he said, in a tiny voice, "I bring you the multiple blessings of my most worshipful descendant, Master Dien Ch'ing, who has attained the exalted position on the Fifth Tier of the Pagoda of Tsien-Tsin. I am Xhou Ch'ing, unworthy dog of a servant, and I request your kind permission to convey to you a proposition upon which I hope you will look with merciful favour."
Genevieve managed to get a charm to work, and violet fire sprung from her nails. Xhou waved the bolts aside as if a light breeze had disarranged his moustaches, and continued.
"My descendant bears you no ill-will, and promises that he intends to do you no further harm. All he requires is that you remain within these forests for three days, and not attempt to communicate any information you may have come by at the hunting lodge last night to anyone in the city of Zhufbar. Thereafter, he will reward you with anything you desire... riches, a position, spiritual guidance, arcane knowledge. All these can be yours if you simply refrain from taking action..."

Xhou had floated nearer, and was now holding steady an arm's length away from them. He kept his position in the air relative to the cart even as it moved forwards. Vukotich's reins passed through Xhou, remaining visible inside the transparent spirit.
Genevieve was working frantically, but she had very little magic. Xhou kept absorbing her blows with ease. He purred suavely, making more and more offers. Vukotich had the feeling that they were in trouble.
"It pains me to raise the possibility," Xhou said, his face an exaggerated tragic mask, "but were you not to give your assent to my descendant's honourable and equitable proposition, I would suspect that he intends to do you considerable injury. As a favoured associate of the Lord of the Fifteen Devils, he can summon up considerable enchantments, against which you would have no chance at all of prevailing. Indeed, I am privileged to be familiar with the exquisite torments to which you are likely to be subject if, regrettably, you do not hold your worthy tongues, and I can assure you that the pains you will experience will be extensive, varied, unmerciful and..."
Suddenly, Genevieve lashed out with her right hand, dragging Vukotich's arm away from his body. Her hand sank into Xhou's form, and she dipped her arm into the spirit to the elbow.
Xhou flew to pieces, and was gone.
Vukotich was astonished. Genevieve smiled, a little smugly. "Vampires aren't the only things that don't like silver."
"Of course."
"There'll be other attacks. The Celestial won't stop at sending messengers."
Vukotich knew she was right.
"If we change our direction, we might appease him. If we went to the Black Mountains that would show we have no intention of interfering in his business."
The vampire looked shocked. "You'd let them get away with it?"
Vukotich shrugged. "Why not? I don't give a lashworm's tooth for Glinka."
"But what of the Old World?"
"It's not my Master. I have no Master. If I'm paid, I'll fight.
If not, then the Emperor and the Chaos Cultists can tear each other to scraps for all I care."
The vampire was quiet for a moment. Vukotich pulled the reins, and halted the ox.

"Do we turn around?" he asked.
Genevieve's face was unreadable. She had scraped off her whore's paint, and looked very much like a child.
"Well?"
"No," she said. "We'll go to Zhufbar and save that damned killjoy. We have no choice."
"You may not, but I do."
Genevieve smiled, teeth gleaming. She rattled the chain. "Vukotich, where I go, you go. Remember that."
"We should part soon. You can be about your business, and I shall follow my own course."
The vampire was exasperated. "You really are an Iron Man, aren't you? You've nothing but your calling."
Vukotich almost remembered something, but it was from his long-vanished, never-again-thought-of past. It passed.
"Pay me, and I'll fight."
"Very well, I'll become your Mistress. You may not like it."
Vukotich looked at her. "You have nothing, bloodsucker. You have no gold to buy me."
Genevieve laughed bitterly. "No, but I have a little silver."
By nightfall, they were in Chloesti, a medium-sized town. They arrived during some ceremony. There was a huge bonfire in the town square, and the familiar robed figures were approaching in a procession, throwing fuel into the blaze. It was a solemn occasion, without any music or dancing. Genevieve supposed it might be some kind of funeral rite. The old practices died hard in the outlying settlements of the Empire. Once, hundreds of years ago, she'd been thrown into a fire just like this in a Black Mountain village. It had taken ten years to grow all her skin back. She was surprised that the Moral Crusade had established itself even out here in the wilds. It lent an added urgency to her sense of mission. Blasko must be stopped.
Since they made their bargain, Vukotich had been quiet. Genevieve wasn't certain how they could get past whatever barriers the Celestial was erecting to stop them, but she knew if she could get to Temple Master Wulfric, she could do something. If they were lucky, this affair would discredit Glinka as well as Blasko, and the Empire could get back to its comfortable mix of vice and virtue. It was strange how fate came around. Here she was,

pretending to be a heroine again. When this was over, she would go back to being a barmaid, or perhaps seek out the Convent of the Order of Eternal Night and Solace and retreat from the messes of humankind. She was tired of Great Deeds, of songs and chap-books.

They found the path of the cart blocked by townsfolk, standing in silence as the Moral Crusaders marched up to the fire.

"What's going on?" Genevieve asked.

A dejected-looking young man cursed and spat. "Glinka's Goodbodies just took over the Burgomeister's Offices."

"What's in the fire?"

A respectable-looking woman shushed them. She had a noticeable moustache. The young man, who had obviously been drinking something not coffee, ignored her.

"Immoral books, they say, the meddling morons. They can't read and they can't write, but they know which books aren't good for you."

Genevieve was intrigued. What could Chloesti harbour capable of outraging the Crusade? Was there perhaps a secret cache in the area, containing the *Proscribed Grimoires of Slaanesh,* as famously illustrated by the perverse woodcutter Khuff, or Berthe Manneheim's long-forbidden *Arts of a Courtesan*?

"Immoral, hah!" the young man spat again. "Children's picture books, and the plays of Tarradasch. Images offend the gods, they say, and words are worse. Words are the worst thing of all, because they make people think, make people want for things outside the narrow range of their experience. Things like freedom. The freedom to think, to love, to question. The freedom to breathe."

Two Acolytes struggled by with a huge painting depicting the sister goddesses Shallya and Myrmidia at play. The technique was crude, but there was a certain naive charm to the interpretation. It was tossed into the flames and consumed in an instant.

Acolytes on horseback dashed into the square, dragging broken statues behind them with ropes. Stone and plaster limbs and heads shattered against

the cobbles. A head rolled under the ox's hooves. Painted marble, it looked unpleasantly realistic.
The fires burned fiercely. Firefly sparks spiralled up into the air like daemon ticks.
"It must be hard for them," the young man said, "to be confined to burning poems, when what they'd really like to do is burn poets."
The complainer's hands, Genevieve noticed, were liberally stained with ink, and his hair was a fingerlength longer than customary in this region. There was a large, floppy blossom in the lapel of his waistcoat, and his sleeves were loose and embroidered. She deduced his profession.
"Barbarous fools," the poet shouted, waving a fist. "You'll never silence the voice of Art!"
The woman with the moustache was deeply offended now. She had a child with her, a plump boy who was looking up at the angry poet with obvious admiration. Anyone capable of so upsetting his mama must have something worth watching. Burning pages floated above the square, crumpling to black ash.
The poet had attracted the Acolytes, and a few of them were converging on him. Genevieve shrank against Vukotich, trying to seem like an innocent bystander.
"He's the trouble-maker," said the woman, pointing. "The long-haired disgrace."
The child was pulling at her skirts. She swatted him, and dragged him away.
The Acolytes took hold of the poet, and wrestled him out of the crowd.
The woman was fighting her son now. "Come, come, Detlef," she said, "you don't want to be with these nasty people. Poets and playwrights and actors and harlots. You're to be a vegetable merchant, like your papa, and keep us comfy in our old age."
Genevieve felt sorry for the little boy. She looked at him. He couldn't have been more than six or seven.
The Acolytes had their iron bars out now, and were giving the poet a pummelling. He was still shouting about Art living forever. There was blood on his face.
"And she's in it too," the vegetable merchant's wife screeched, pointing at Genevieve. "She's with the scribbling swine!"

The Acolytes' hoods bobbed as they looked up at the cart. Vukotich shook his head. He must seem massive from below, and definitely presented a more threatening appearance than the reedy poet.
"Well," said the woman, "aren't you going to chastise them as sinners?"
Genevieve and little Detlef stared at each other. There was something about his chubby face. He seemed fascinated with her. That happened sometimes, especially with children. Vampires were supposed to have that power, and some she had known - certainly including her father-in-darkness Chandagnac - had indeed been possessed of it. With her, it was a random, unselective, rare thing. And it worked both ways.
The Acolytes thought better of picking on Vukotich and dragged the poet away. The mercenary glowered at the vegetable merchant's wife. She was shoved forwards by the crowd, and Vukotich put out a hand to fend her off. She backhanded his arm out of the way, and he fell in the seat, his hand flailing down by the woman's skirts. Genevieve wondered what he was doing. He righted himself. The woman forced her way away from the wagon, tugging on her son's arm. Little Detlef smiled at Genevieve, and was gone.

The moment was over, the *frisson* passed.

A wheelbarrowload of books went into the fire, and the Acolytes pitched the barrow itself after them. There were no roars of approval, just a blank silence. Someone on a raised platform was preaching a sermon against wine, sensational literature, dancing and licentiousness.
"Her," someone shouted, pointing at a young woman standing near them, "she makes up to all the men, leads good husbands astray..."
The woman cringed, and turned to run, her long braids falling from her headscarf.
"And Ralphus Mariposo," shouted another voice, "he is always singing, always dancing..."
The accusations flew. Townsfolk turned on each other, branding their neighbours as degenerates, lechers, drunkards, gluttons, slackworkers, weirdroot-chewers, inverts, Chaos Cultists, adulterers, rumour-mongers, body-snatchers, abusers of the livestock, lycanthropes, changelings, subversive elements, free-thinkers, hobgoblins-in-disguise, traitors to the

Empire. Some were hauled out by the Acolytes and beaten. Others fled, or were turned upon by the crowds.
Genevieve nudged Vukotich and tried to get him to back the cart out of the crowd, but it was impossible. The people were packed in too tight, and the animal couldn't move. It strained in its harness.
There was a near-riot now. Cobblestones had been pulled up and were flying through the air. One struck Genevieve in the head, doing no harm. The ox was down on its knees now, people fighting around it.
"... perverter of children... imbiber of foul liquors... oblater at unclean altars... strangler of young goats... sourer of cream... giver of short measures..."
"We have to get out of this," she told Vukotich.
The ox's hide was bloody now. Someone had stabbed the animal. Two men were fighting with knives, each accusing the other of molesting a girl called Hilde Goetz. Someone was pushed into the fire, and ran screaming through the crowd. It was an immensely fat dwarf, and his oiled hair was burning like a lantern.
Vukotich put his arm around her, wrapping the chain about her back, and got a good grip. He stepped down from the cart, helping her as if she were an invalid.
"Out of my way," he said. "My wife is going to have a baby."
The brawlers separated, and they were able to make their way out of the crowd. She was surprised at his presence of mind in coming up with a reasonable excuse for their behaviour.
"You," he said to one of the knifemen. "Where's the nearest hostelry?"
Vukotich towered over the man. His opponent stood off while he answered the mercenary.
"Th-the Easeful Rest," he said. "It's on the Karak-Varn road, to the North."
"Thank you, friend. My regards to Hilde Goetz."
They walked away from the crowd, Vukotich supporting her as if her time were near. She moaned and groaned.
The brawlers got back to their fight, knives flashing in the firelight.
"We'll take refuge for the night," he said, "and be on our way early tomorrow."
"We've no money, Vukotich."
He grinned and produced a pouch of coins.

"The goodwife with the moustache won't miss it."
The Easeful Rest was the type of hostelry where all the previous customers appear to have been couples named either Schmidt or Braun. The Night Man was snoring, balanced against the wall in his chair, when Vukotich and Genevieve arrived, their blanket around their shoulders as if it were raining outside. With his left hand, which he was getting used to favouring, Vukotich rang the bell, and the Night Man fell out of his chair.
"A room for the night," Vukotich said.
The Night Man ambled over, and pulled out the great, leatherbound ledger and a quill. He opened its pages as if handling a sacred grimoire containing the secret whereabouts of Sigmar Heldenhammer, and wrote in the date.
"Your name?" he asked.
"Schmidt," Vukotich said. "Johann and Maria Schmidt."
The Night Man's throat apple bobbed up and down.
"We've stayed here before," Vukotich insisted.
"Yes," the Night Man agreed, "before... before was, I'm afraid, a different matter. The Moral Crusade, you understand..."
Vukotich glowered, trying to look as intimidating as possible.
"... without a certificate of marriage, I'm sorry, but we have no rooms available..."
With his left hand, Vukotich reached out and grasped a handful of the Night Man's shirt.
"We're good customers. Mrs Schmidt and I have always enjoyed the hospitality of the Easeful Rest."
"... um... er... certainly. It's a pleasure to see you again, Mr Schmidt... I hope you and your lovely wife enjoy your stay with us."
Vukotich grunted. The Night Man held out the quill, and Vukotich reached for it.
Genevieve grabbed his wrist and kept his right hand by his side, and took the quill herself.
"I'll sign, shall I, dear?" she said. "Johann has hurt his hand."
Embarrassed at having nearly made such a blunder, Vukotich kept quiet as Genevieve neatly scribbled their aliases in the register.
The Night Man found a candle and a key, and gave them instructions to find their room. It was off the first floor landing, with a commanding view of the pigpens and, alas, the fragrance to go with it.

"I could do with a bath," Genevieve said.
"No chance in a filth-hole like this," Vukotich replied, stamping on a many-legged creature that scuttled out from under the large bed. "Besides, we'd have to cut ourselves out of our clothes."
"You could do with a bath, too. A couple of days in that outfit hasn't perfumed you too much."
She wandered around the room, looking in the drawers of the chests and opening the cupboards, and he, of necessity, trailed with her. Finally satisfied she had the measure of the room - a mixture of curiosity and caution, she tugged him over to the bed, sat down, and unlaced her torn and grimy slippers.
He was ready to drop on the bed and die, but Genevieve, the night creature, was more awake than ever.
Her clothes had stood up even less well than his to the exertions of the last few days. Flimsy in the first place, they were now indecent enough to give Claes Glinka apoplexy. She slipped the blanket off and dropped it on a floor, then stretched like a cat. Almost playfully, she pulled their chain, and raised her sharp nails to brush his cheek.
Vukotich would never understand women, much less vampire women.
"How old... ?" he asked.
She pouted slightly. "Very."
They were both on the bed now, their chain curled daintily between them. Vukotich wasn't tired any more.
Genevieve unfastened her chemise, and exposed her slim white body to the light of two moons. Her chest rose and fell. She still breathed.
That was important to Vukotich, to know she was not really dead, just different. He'd been with women who were different before, and never caught a trace of the warpstone.
He rolled over, and kissed her harshly. She didn't struggle, but he could tell she thought he tasted bad. With both hands, her arm and the chain in the way, he unfastened his britches.
She didn't fight him. She held him patiently, and responded pleasantly, but he could tell she wasn't caught up in their love-making. A lesser whore would have counterfeited a reaction, cajoled and flattered him. The chain got caught between them and left red link-marks on their bodies.
It was over quickly.

Exhausted, sweat-damp, Vukotich pulled himself from her, and crawled under the coverlet. A chain's-length away, he lapsed into sleep.
Her touch came on his face, cool and pointed.
"Satisfied?" she asked. It was a traditional whore's question.
He breathed a "yes", hoping he would not dream of the Battle tonight.
"Good." She kissed him gently, and slipped beside him, curving her body against his.
She kissed him again. Half-asleep, he could not respond.
She kissed his shoulder, and his neck.
He felt a brief prick of pain as her mouthknives parted his skin, and then drifted into a daze.
He was emptying, slowly, deliciously...
The waterbowl showed a town across the Blackwater. Chloesti. Dien Ch'ing had never been there, but he knew where it was. There was a hostelry. The Easeful Rest. A most apt name. Most apt.
Venerable Xhou had proved a disappointment, and would be bound by Tsien-Tsin in the Netherhells beneath the Pagoda for a century or so as a punishment for failure.
The vampire and the mercenary would require a sterner lesson.
On the flagstones, warmed by the light of the early morning sun, Ch'ing laid out scraps from his trunk. A dried piece of bamboo from the Forbidden Fields of Wu-Fan-Xu. An empty ivory vessel from Jackal Province. A phial of soil from the Eternal Gardens of the Monkey-King. A sealed bauble of water from the Great River of Cathay. A smear of eternally-burning sulphur from the Dragon's Tongue Slopes.
Wood. Air. Earth. Water. Fire.
Ch'ing conjured up the Five Element Masters, the chief subject daemons of Tsien-Tsin.
The Masters would bar the interlopers' path.
Ch'ing pulled on his robes. He must meditate for a day and a night. For tomorrow, his magic would be needed in the service of Tsien-Tsin.
Tomorrow, Claes Glinka would die.
Vukotich woke up to an intense awareness of his hurts. He felt every wound he had ever sustained, as if they were open and bleeding again. His limbs were anvil-heavy. The sunlight was a hammerblow.
"Don't worry," she said. "It'll wear off."

He sat up, and lunged for her. The sudden movement triggered a series of hitherto-unnoticed pains, and, seized up, he sank gently back onto the pillow. His rage still burned.
"You bled me, you bitch!"
She was fully dressed, some of the bedclothes converted into a practical skirt and shawl.
She looked at him, unreadably.
"It was only fair. You took your pleasure of me."
He fingered the wounds on his throat. They still itched.
"What have you done to me? The light hurts."
She took a physician's look into his eyes.
"You'll be a little sensitive for a few days. Nothing more. You won't be my get. Not that you'd have any right to complain if you did. How many girls have you left pregnant on your campaigns, eh?"
"That's..."
"Not the same? I know. Come on, get up. We've a day and a night to get to Zhufbar."
Vukotich remembered it all. The assassination. His bargain with the leech. He'd had some unsavoury masters and mistresses in his years as a sword-for-hire, but this one was the crowning glory of a murky career. No one was ever going to sing songs about him.
She helped him dress. It was humiliating, but his movements were slow, as if he had all the physical symptoms of drunkenness without the exhilaration, and hers were deft. They were getting used to managing the chain, and it vanished without much fuss up his sleeve and under her new shawl.
Downstairs, the Night Man was still on duty. At least, he was still there. And there were others waiting for them. A couple of local bullyboys with the symbols of the Moral Crusade pinned to their sleeves, a steeple-hooded Acolyte of Purity, and a timid, spinsterish Cleric of Verena.
The Night Man pointed at them. "That's Mr and Mrs Schmidt," he said, trembling.
Vukotich's heart slumped in his chest.
"Made quite a night of it, by the looks of them," said the Acolyte.
Vukotich wished he had thought last night to steal a weapon.
"Married, are you, then?" asked the Acolyte.

"For three years, now," replied Genevieve. "We've two children, left with their grandmother in Zhufbar."
The Acolyte laughed nastily. "Pull the other one, it's got Taal's antlers on it."
"Marriage," began the Cleric, "is a sacred thing. Its name should not be abused and sullied for the furtherance of base carnal lusts."
Vukotich thought the Worshipper of Learning and Wisdom would have been truly upset to learn what had actually happened in their room last night. His blood, what little of it was left, started to race again.
"If you're married," said the Acolyte, "then you won't mind taking a few vows before the Goddess of Truth, would you?"
The Cleric pulled out a sacred text from under her cloak, and started looking through it for the marriage ceremony. There must be a condensed version for urgent occasions.
The bullies were smirking. Vukotich knew this charade had more to do with the universal desire to poke into everybody's business than with any notion of spiritual purity. He remembered that Claes Glinka's idea of just punishment for fornication was a thorough stoning.
"Do you, Johann Schmidt, take this woman..."
Suddenly, every scrap of furniture in the room burst into splinters. The chairs, the desks, the low table loaded with religious tracts, even the beams in the ceiling. Everything made of wood. One of the bullies had false teeth, which leaped out of his mouth. The staircase beneath Vukotich and Genevieve collapsed.
Instinctively, he covered her with his body, and his back was lashed by innumerable needles.
The wooden fragments danced in the air.
The Acolyte dropped to his knees, a chairleg protruding from his heart. He tore at his hood, pulling it away from an open, ordinary face. One of the bullies was bleeding and moaning on the floor, the other had been thrown out of the hostelry. The Night Man made a dash for the window, but the sill and the crossbars reached out for him. The cleric looked for the rite of exorcism.
This must be some cursed Celestial magic.
The wooden whirlwind was assembling into a manshape.

Vukotich dragged Genevieve out of the Easeful Rest through a new-made hole in the wall. She was lucky not to have suffered the Acolyte's fate. A length of oak or ash through her heart would have ended her eternity.

The wood daemon erupted from the ruins of the inn, pursued by the chanting priestess. It had a face, and its face looked angry. The streets were full of panicking people.

The Moral Crusaders had come in a carriage, which stood waiting at the kerb. Vukotich hauled Genevieve, who was picking bits and pieces out of her clothes, up onto the seat, and grabbed the reins.

"Hang on tight."

He whipped the horses, and the carriage tottered away from the Easeful Rest. People got out of the way, fast. The wooden creature loped after them, but it wasn't used yet to physical form, and they outdistanced it. It was hampered by its size and the buildings in its way, but it kept steady on their trail, smashing whatever got in its way.

"What was that?" Vukotich asked as they cleared Chloesti, and followed the beaten-earth Blackwater Road. The horses had had enough of a fright to give them added speed. The carriage rattled as it jumped in and out of the wheelruts.

"A Cathayan Wood Master," Genevieve breathed. "I hoped I'd never see one of those things again. It's an Elemental."

"Wood? That's not an element."

"It is in Cathay. Along with the usual ones... Air..."

A wind blew up, knocking the horses over, tilting the carriage. Two of the wheels spun backwards in mid-air. Vukotich hauled on the reins, but felt himself slipping...

"... Earth..."

The road in front of them erupted like a volcano, spewing muddy soil into the sky...

"... Water..."

A small pond rose out of the ground, shaping itself as it twisted. The carriage was on its side now, and they were sprawled, feeling the movements in the road as the Elementals formed.

"... and Fire!"

There was a terrific explosion.

Genevieve tried to remember the tales Master Po had told her in Cathay. One of them had some relevance to their current situation. The Monkey-King, when he was a Monkey-Prince, had faced all five Masters, and bested them through trickery.

They were under the carriage now, with the Masters standing over them, more-or-less in oversize human form. The Wood Master exchanged a ferocious look with the Fire Master, and Genevieve remembered the fable.

It was ridiculous, but it was the only thing she had that might work.

"It's like the dragon swallowing its tail," she muttered, "or the scissors-paper-stone game."

She crawled out from under the wrecked vehicle, dragging Vukotich on his chain.

She bowed in the Cathayan fashion, and addressed the elementals in their own language.

"Masters, I recognize that my time has come to pass beyond the gates of life. I grant you an honourable victory. However, in view of my many years I would request that my death be solely the responsibility of the mightiest of the mighty. May I enquire which of you is the most powerful, the most terrible, the most feared?"

She thought she had the Monkey-Prince's speech down to the last word.

The Tales of Master Po were evidently prohibited on the Pagoda, for the five giants looked, bewildered, at one another.

"Come now, one of you must be mightier than the others. It is to him I would offer my surrender."

The Fire Master roared. The Air Master blew a hurricane. The Earth Master rumbled like a tremor. The Wood Master creaked like an aged tree. The Water Master showered them with rain.

"Surely, all of you cannot be the mightiest? One of you must be Lord of All Others. Each must have his place on the Pagoda."

Vukotich was open-mouthed, unable to understand.

The Masters clamoured again, each insisting on his superiority over all the others.

"This, I do not believe," Genevieve said. "Five Masters, all of equal mightiness. Truly, my death will be quintuply honoured."

The Fire Master lashed out a tentacle of flame, and Genevieve flinched. But she need not have, the Water Master had knocked the flame aside. The Fire

Master shrank away from the Water Master, causing the Wood Master to take a few steps backwards to avoid the Fire Master's burning body.
The Elementals argued among themselves.
Finally, arguments were not enough. The Masters turned on each other, and the area was devastated. Vukotich and Genevieve, spared in the fight because they were the prize, stood in an island of calm amid the chaos.
"While the Monkey-Prince laughed," Master Po had said, "the Fire Master burned up the Wood Master, the Wood Master broke the hurricanes of the Air Master, the Air Master blew away into dust the Earth Master, the Earth Master absorbed the moisture of the Water Master, and the Water Master doused the flames of the Fire Master. Eventually, Lord Tsien-Tsin transported all the Masters back to the Pagoda, and subjected them to his wrath."
In the fable, it sounded a lot neater and cleaner than it was. Mud rained down on them, and charred chunks of wood. The Elementals merged into one body, and that body tore itself apart. They were deafened by the shrieks of the suffering daemons.
"Thank you, Master Po," Genevieve said, bowing her head.
Finally, calm fell. The area was littered with burned wood, and splatters of mud. The air was still. Boiling pools hissed.
Vukotich gave thanks to his gods in a tongue Genevieve didn't know.
"What did you say?" he asked.
"I told them a story."
He was satisfied.
Their carriage was useless. One of the horses was lamed, the other dead.
"So," she said. "We walk to the Blackwater, and then to Zhufbar."
They trudged through the mud, and left the remains of the Element Masters behind them.
They reached the shores of the Blackwater by nightfall. Vukotich felt strange as the sun set, the weakness that had nagged at him all day fading with the light. Evidently, there were compensations to being bled by a vampire. The day's journey had been hard on them both, and they had abandoned all pretence of hiding their chain. If they were taken now, they could at least tell their story and pass on their responsibility. But they met no one on the road save a party of dwarfs who vanished into the forests at the first sight of them. Genevieve had been quiet since she convinced the

Elementals to destroy themselves, and Vukotich had saved his lungs for walking. Something invisible hung between them, a communion of blood that linked them as surely as their chain of silver and iron. Weary under the sun, Vukotich had tasted the vampire's dreams. There was nothing coherent, just a set of impressions, of tastes, of images. Last night, taking her into his bed, he had felt a certain shame mixed in with his desire. Although he could not deny his attraction to the girlshape, he had still felt almost a disgust at himself for so wanting the monster. Now, he had changed his opinion. Genevieve Dieudonne was a creature of the night, but she was no thing of Chaos. Her flesh might be cool, but she was more truly human than many he had known. Feelings he had never allowed himself danced just beyond his thoughts, waiting to move into his mind just as the forces of Chaos wait forever to overwhelm the world.

The Blackwater was still, two moons reflected in its dark, glassy surface. All the harbours and jetties for pleasure boats and fisherfolk were on the other side, at Zhufbar and Karak Varn. This was the further shore, where the forests stood at the edge of the inland sea, and the mad wolves drank the salt water.

It would take too long to travel around the Blackwater. They must find a boat and cross.

The moons were high, and Vukotich's blood was singing. He could hardly contain his energies, and found himself fidgeting with the chain.

"Stop that," Genevieve said. "It'll wear off in a few days. You've a trace of my blood in you. With Ulric's blessing, it will give you the strength to get us across the sea."

Vukotich wanted her again. Here, where the dark waters lapped the stony shore, he wanted to make a bed and force himself upon her. He was dizzy with lust. But more than he wanted her, more than he needed a release for his desires, he wanted her to open the wounds on his neck, and bleed him. If she drank from him again, he felt sure that the vague impressions she had left him with would become glass-clear in his mind. Knowledge would be his. He would be stronger, better, purer. He pulled his shirt away from his bites. They were bleeding.

Delicately, like a clean-minded cat, she licked his throat. A thrill coursed through his body. He could taste the spices in the night air. His hearing was as acute as hers. He waited for the prick of her teeth.

"Come on," she said, yanking his chain, "we've no time for that. Stop mooning like a lovestruck poet, and help me find a boat."
Her words were like slaps across the face. She turned, and pulled, and he stumbled along after her.
He thought of the silver he was being paid, and he was ashamed of himself. He thought of her flat, closed, understanding face as he made love to her, and he hated himself.
He thought of her sharp-furred tongue cleaning away the blood seeping from his wounds... and he made himself pick up his feet and trail after her.
They found an old rowing boat tied up at a disused quay. Genevieve thanked the gods, and Vukotich examined it closely.
"It's rotten," he said. "The bottom will give way. It's a miracle it hasn't sunk at its mooring."
"But it will get us across the Blackwater," said Genevieve, the bloodfire in her eyes. "Because it must."
Emerging at dawn from his trance of preparation, Dien Ch'ing pulled on his Acolyte's robes. He would join the others of the Temple of Purity outside the city walls, on the shores of the Blackwater. This small inland sea, one hundred miles in length, fifty miles across, was famous for the impenetrability of its depths. A fabulous monster was rumoured to inhabit it, and the fishermen were always competing with tall tales of the creature's size, ferocity and mysteriousness. After today, there would be other stories told about the Blackwater. The story of Claes Glinka's death on its shores.
Ch'ing joined the procession as it left the Temple, and bowed his hooded head. Under his robe, he carried the magical blade that could strike from afar.
Wladislaw Blasko would have his speech of vengeance rehearsed. And his confederates in the conspiracy would have an especially hideous mutant - a dog-headed retard - ready to take the blame and be promptly put to death by the militia. Then, quietly, he would be able to depart the city for Kislev, where Lord Tsien-Tsin and High Priest Yefimovich would have other missions for him. The Invisible Empire rewarded its faithful servants.
The sun shone down on the inky black waters, and the delegates to the Festival of Ulric were waiting in the especially erected stands. It had been a hard week of ceremony, secret negotiation, planning, bargaining, speech-

making and decorous feasting. Glinka's coffee houses had been overflowing with officers searching in vain for entertainment.

Glinka was at the head of the procession of purity, his hood thrown back. Ch'ing was a few Acolytes behind him, focusing his attention on the small of the Moral Crusader's back, where the shadowblade would strike.

Everyone was quiet. Glinka would have no music for this parade. Ch'ing had read the speech the Crusader intended to deliver, and mused to himself that even the staunchest defender of the Empire would secretly bless him for cutting it short.

There was a stage put up on the beach, the shimmering black waters lapping at its foundations. Blasko stood upon it, with several of his men-at-arms, and with some heroes of the Empire. Maximilian von Konigswald looked bored and sullen. A week without strong drink or a pretty girl does that to a soldier.

Blasko was calm, collected, prepared. There would be no trouble there. He was perfectly schooled in his part.

Blasko shook Glinka's hand as the Crusader took the lectern, and was brushed off. He smiled at the slight. Ch'ing kept well away from Glinka, but felt the magical buzz building up in the knife. Without removing it from his robe, he could thrust into the Moralist's vitals...

Glinka began his address, and the distinguished audience grew restless.

Ch'ing called for the strength of Tsien-Tsin to do the bidding of the Invisible Empire of Chaos.

Glinka got worked up about the sorry state of the Empire's morals, and pointedly looked from face to face as he listed the sins even the most exalted were prone to. Lechery. Drunkenness. Dishonesty. Gluttony. Questioning of Authority. Sacrilege.

Ch'ing's fist grew hot as the magic charge grew.

Suddenly, from behind, there was a commotion. Glinka paused, and everyone turned...

There was a small boat on the water, near the stage. Two people were climbing out of it, hauling themselves up the support beams. A man and a girl, chained together at the wrist.

Ch'ing pulled out the knife and pointed. A bolt of blue flame squirted across the stage. The vampire twisted out of the way.

Maximilian's sword came into his hand, and Ch'ing had to give him a jolt. He couldn't waste the magic. Glinka had to die.
The Moralist was white with terror. He turned to run, and Ch'ing discharged the killing fire in his direction.
Someone got in the way - an unlucky Acolyte - and burst into flames. Robes streaming fire, he leaped into the waters.
Vukotich and Genevieve were on him now, and he was using the magical implement as a simple dagger.
The mercenary was heavy, but would be an experienced hand-to-hand fighter. The vampire seemed frail, but he knew that must be an illusion. He would not underestimate these foes.
He stabbed, and slashed, but there was a coil of rope under him and he lost his footing. The gods were being unkind to him, punishing him for his arrogance. So be it.
The devil-dagger clattered across the stage. He threw off his assailants, and leaped upright, balancing perfectly. He called for the strength of Lord Tsien-Tsin.
He was alone among his enemies. Very well. It was time to demonstrate his own mastery.
It was time these big-nosed westerners learned the meaning of the Mystic Martial Arts.
The Celestial took up an unfamiliar fighting stance, standing lightly on his feet, his arms casually outstretched, his hands like chopping blades. Vukotich had heard something of the combat techniques of Cathay and Nippon. Now, he supposed, he was going to get a taste of them.
Dien Ch'ing leaped, feet out. Vukotich knew he was going to take a terrific blow on the chest, and probably lose his ribs. But Genevieve was fast, and yanked him out of the way, launching a fast blow of her own.
She punched Ch'ing in the side, and brought him down.
Blasko had a knife out, and was panicking. He stabbed at the girl, ordering his men to follow suit.
Genevieve avoided the daggerthrust, and kicked Blasko's weapon from his grip. Ch'ing launched a toe-point kick at the vampire's head, and struck the empty air where it had been.
Blasko's men had their halberds up, but Maximilian put up his hand, and overruled their master. Of course, as Prince Oswald's father, he must know

who she was.
"Treachery!" shouted the Grand Prince.
Blasko reached for Vukotich's neck. The mercenary grabbed the Lord Marshal's wrists and squeezed. Blasko sank to his knees, but as Vukotich bent over him, he pulled the chain, and Genevieve was off-balanced.
Ch'ing chopped at her face with his hands. Another girl would have been killed, but she was just pushed backwards. The Celestial was unbalanced, and launched himself into the air. Twisting like a daemon acrobat, he sailed over the halberdiers, and landed rightside-up behind Genevieve, landing a snake-swift punch on her shoulder as she turned to face him.
Someone started screaming in a loud, high-pitched voice. It was Claes Glinka, howling for help while people fought for his life.
Blasko struggled out of Vukotich's grip, and made a dash for safety, careering through his own men. His nerve had gone completely. He came to the edge of the stage, and tottered over. There was a splash.
Vukotich and Genevieve stood up, their chain taut between them. Dien Ch'ing smiled at them, bowed, and launched his last attack.
His hands took on a golden glow as he passed them through the air, and his eyes shone. He muttered in his own language, calling down unholy powers. Lightning crackled around him, and a wind came up from nowhere.
He levitated off the stage and floated towards them, gesturing wildly.
"Sorcery," shouted someone. A couple of mages tried working spells of their own. Maximilian ordered everyone to stand back.
The Celestial rose slowly, wisps of white matter emerging from his mouth and taking a shadowform around him. He was floating in the middle of a phantom creature, his eyes glaring out through the horned sockets of a snarling dragon, his outstretched arms the leading edges of ragged spectre wings. A pike was flung at his heart. It turned aside, and clattered to the stage, the force of the throw spent. A mage, the symbols of power standing out on his cloak, strode forwards, his hands up, chanting wildly. Dien Ch'ing let rip with a laugh that literally froze the blood, and the mage was struck with the full impact of it, frost sparkling on the surface of his eyeballs, white droplets of iced sweat starting out on his exposed face. He tumbled like a broken statue, and cracked against the stage.
Everybody stood back.

Vukotich looked at Genevieve, who was staring up at the Celestial, her face set, her body tense.

Ch'ing grew a foggy grey claw from his chest, and it drifted out at the end of an arm, reaching for Glinka. The Moralist shrieked and sobbed, and clutched at the robes of an Acolyte who was trying to flee. The ghost hand settled upon Glinka's head, and closed into a fist. Glinka's screams shut off, but his twisted features were dimly discernible through the thickening murk.

The Celestial's wings were spreading, casting an expanding shadow over the crowd below. The rope of ectoplasm that linked him to Glinka pulsed and thickened. A flower opened in his chest, and bubbles of purple erupted into the ghost arm, drifting through the grey fog towards Glinka's head. Vukotich sensed that if the purple touched the man's face, he would be dead.

"Silver and iron," said Genevieve, raising her left arm, dragging Vukotich's right up with it. "Silver and iron."

The links touched the spectral arm, and jerked up into it, cutting like a heated wire through hardened cheese.

In their attempt to bind them, their captors had given them two of the most magical elements known to alchemy. Silver, anathema to vampires, shapeshifters and spirits. And iron, the scourge of daemonkind.

The chain emerged from the top of the ectoplasmic tube, and the spectral limb came apart, a light dew falling from the air where it had been. Glinka was screaming again, and pleading with someone for help. Maximilian slapped him with the pommel of his sword, and shut him up.

Vukotich and Genevieve, their chain stretched between them, looked up at the Celestial. Ch'ing beat his wings, and rose into the sky.

Maximilian ordered the archers to bring him down, but their shafts snapped in two as they neared the mage. He was still protected by powerful daemons.

Before he vanished into the clouds, Dien Ch'ing waved a cloaklike wing in mocking farewell. To Genevieve, he said, "we'll meet again, my lady," and then he was gone. Vukotich felt a spurt of anger. Why did the Celestial see *Genevieve* as his chosen foe? Was he so insignificant as to be ignored?

Then, a bone-deep tiredness hit him, and his head was as heavy as lead. He watched the mage blend with the grey clouds, and sank to his knees, pulling at Genevieve.

"Blasko's gone," Maximilian said. "All that armour has taken him to the bottom. He'll be food for the Blackwater Beastie."

"Grand Prince," said Genevieve, between breaths, "there was a plot. The Lord Marshal was in league with the Proscribed Cults."

Maximilian snorted. "I thought as much. Never cared for the fellow. Wouldn't put an egg in his broth. No taste."

Vukotich tried to get up, but his limbs were too much for him. His aches were beginning to tell. And he hadn't eaten for days.

"Sir," said one of the men-at-arms to Maximilian. "Look."

The Grand Prince strolled over. Genevieve followed, and Vukotich had to crawl after her on his elbows like a dog.

Attendants were trying to calm down Glinka, whose robe had fallen open.

"Glinka's an altered," said the guard.

It was true. There were spindly extra arms descending from the Moralist's armpits.

"Not so pure, after all, eh?" Maximilian was trying not to gloat. Vukotich knew this revelation would mean the end of the Moral Crusade. The Grand Prince turned to an attendant. "Get me a drink," he said. "Get us all a drink. And I don't mean blood-and-be-damned coffee!" A blacksmith was found, and their shackles sawn off. Genevieve was quiet, surrounded by officials asking her questions. She was polite in her answers, but distant. Vukotich rubbed his wrist. It felt strange to be free. It was amazing what you could get used to if you had to. Then, he collapsed again.

He woke up to find Maximilian von Konigswald by his bed, with a bottle of *Alte Geheerentode* rum.

He had slept for two days.

During that time, mobs had torn down the Temple of Purity, and Claes Glinka had been imprisoned for his own protection. Since his exposure as an altered, he had been a raving madman. His coffee houses closed down, and mainly reopened as the taverns they had once been. The second-hand

bookstalls in the market were burdened with unsaleable tracts of moral improvement. Wladislaw Blasko's body had not been found, and a new Lord Marshal had been appointed from among the ranks of the city's best men. Dien Ch'ing had disappeared completely, spirited away by daemons. According to Celestial lore, any follower of the dread Tsien-Tsin who failed in the accomplishment of a mission could expect a long and painful afterlife in the Netherhells, and so Ch'ing was not thought to have escaped Justice by his disappearance. The Courtesans' Guild had declared that its members would work one evening for free in celebration at the downfall of the Moral Crusade, and the largest city-wide festival ever to be seen in Zhufbar had taken place. And Vukotich had missed it.

"Where's..."

"The girl?" Maximilian looked puzzled. "Gone. She slipped away before all the celebrations started. A pity. She'd have been a heroine all over again. It's her way, though. She did the same thing after she and my son... well, you know the story."

Vukotich sat up in bed. His wounds didn't pain him so much now, although his throat was still tender.

Genevieve! Gone!

"She said something about a Retreat. Some convent or other. In Kislev. You'd best leave her be, lad. Heroine or not, she's still... well... not quite like us, you know. No, not quite like us."

Maximilian poured him a goblet of the dangerous spirit, and he scalded his throat with it.

"She left you something, though. She said you'd know what it was for."

Vukotich took another fiery swallow. Hot tears came to his eyes. It was the strong spirit. *Alte Geheerentode* would make any man's eyes water.

The Grand Prince threw the padded ring, shining silver where it was sawn through, onto the bed.

"Genevieve said you'd understand. Do you?"

Fingering the marks on his neck, Vukotich wasn't sure. Inside him, the last sparks of her were fading. The wounds he would wear forever, but the link he had had with the vampire was shattered with their chain.

He picked up the silver, and gave it to Maximilian. "Give it to the temple," he said, "for the poor."

"Which temple?" asked the Grand Prince.
Weariness crept up Vukotich's body again. Inside him something was dying.
"Any one," he replied. "Any one."

THE DARK BENEATH THE WORLD

by William King

A scream echoed through the cold mountain air. Felix Jaegar ripped his sword from its scabbard and stood ready. Snowflakes fell, a chill wind stirred his long blonde hair. He threw his red woollen cloak back over his shoulder, leaving his swordarm unobstructed. The bleak landscape was a perfect site for an ambush; pitted and rocky, harsher than the face of the greater moon, Mannslieb.
He glanced left, upslope. A few stunted pines clutched the mountainside with gnarled roots. Downslope, to the right, lay an almost sheer drop. Neither direction held any sign of danger. No bandits, no orcs, none of the darker things that lurked in these remote heights.
"The noise came from up ahead, manling," said Gotrek Gurnisson, rubbing his eye patch with one huge, tattooed hand. His nose chain jingled in the breeze, "There's a fight going on up there."
Uncertainty filled Felix. He knew Gotrek was correct; even with only one eye the dwarfs senses were keener than his own. The question was whether to stand and wait or push forward and investigate. Potential enemies filled the World's Edge Mountains. The chances of finding friends were slim. His natural caution inclined him towards doing nothing.
Gotrek charged up the scree-strewn path, enormous axe held high above his red-dyed crest of hair. Felix cursed. For once why couldn't Gotrek remember that not everyone was a Trollslayer?
"We didn't all swear to seek out death in combat," he muttered, before following slowly, for he lacked the dwarfs sure-footedness over the treacherous terrain.

Felix took in the scene of carnage with one swift glance. In the long depression a gang of hideous green-skinned orcs battled a smaller group of men. They fought across a fast-flowing stream that ran down the little valley before disappearing over the mountain edge in a cloud of silver spray. The waters ran red with the blood of men and horses. It was easy to imagine what had happened - an ambush as the humans crossed the water.

In mid-stream a huge man in shiny plate-mail battled with three brawny bow-legged assailants. Wielding his two-handed blade effortlessly, he feinted a blow to his left then beheaded a different foe with one mighty swing. The force of his blow almost overbalanced him. Felix realized the stream bed must be slippy.

On the nearer bank a man in dark-brocaded robes chanted a spell. A ball of fire blazed in his left hand. A dark-haired warrior in the furred hat and deerskin tunic of a trapper protected the wizard from two screaming orcs, using only a longsword held in his left hand. As Felix watched a blonde man-at-arms fell, trying to hold in entrails released by a scimitar slash to his stomach. As he went down burly half-naked savages hacked him to pieces. Only three of the ambushed party now stood. They were outnumbered five to one.

"Orcish filth! You dare to soil the sacred approach to Carag Eight Peaks. *Uruk mortari!* Prepare to die," screamed Gotrek, charging down into the melee.

An enormous orc turned to face him. A look of surprise froze forever on its face as Gotrek lopped off its head with one mighty stroke. Emerald blood spattered the Trollslayer's tattooed body. Raving and snarling, the dwarf ploughed into the orcs, hewing left and right in a great double arc. Dead bodies lay everywhere his axe fell.

Felix half-ran, half-slid downslope. He fell at the bottom. Wet grass tickled his nostrils. He rolled to one side as a scimitar-wielding monster half-again his bulk chopped down at him. He sprang to his feet, ducked a cut that could have chopped him in two and lopped off an earlobe with his return blow.

Startled, the orc clutched at its wound, trying to stop the blood flowing down its face. Felix seized his chance and stabbed upwards through the

bottom of the creature's jaw into its brain.
As he struggled to free his blade another monster leapt on him, swinging its blade high over its head. Felix let go of his weapon and moved to meet his attacker. He grabbed its wrists as he was overborne. Foetid breath made him gag as the orc fell on top of him. The thing dropped its weapon and they wrestled on the ground, rolling downslope into the stream.
Copper rings set in the orc's flesh pinched him as it sought to bite his throat with its sharp tusks. Felix writhed to avoid having his windpipe torn out. The orc pushed his head under water. Felix looked up through stinging eyes and saw the strangely distorted face leering down at him. Bitterly cold water filled his mouth. There was no air in his lungs. Frantically he shifted his weight, trying to dislodge his attacker. They rolled and suddenly Felix was astride the orc, trying to push its head under water.
The orc grabbed his wrists and pushed. Locked in a deadly embrace they began to roll downslope through the freezing water. Again and again Felix's head went under, again and again he floundered gasping to the surface. Sharp rocks speared his flesh. Realization of his peril flashed through his mind; the current and their own momentum carried them towards the cliff edge. Felix tried to break free, giving up all thoughts of drowning his opponent.
When next his head broke surface, he looked for the cloud of spray. To his horror it was only twenty feet away. He redoubled his efforts to escape but the orc held on like grim death and they continued their downward tumble.
Ten feet now. Felix heard the rumble of the fall, felt the distorted currents of the turbulent water. He drew back his fist and smacked the orc in the face. One of its tusks broke but it would not let go.
Five feet to go. He lashed out once more, bouncing the orc's head off the stream bottom. Its grip loosened. He was almost free.
Suddenly he was falling, tumbling through water and air. He frantically grabbed for something, anything, to hold. His hand smashed into the rock and he struggled for a grip on the slippery streambed. The pressure of the freezing water on his head and shoulders was almost intolerable. He risked a downward look.
A long way below he saw the valleys in the foothills. So great was the drop that copses of trees looked like blotches of mould on the landscape. The falling orc was a receding, screaming greenish blob.

With the last of hs strength Felix flopped over the edge, pushing against the current with cold-numbed fingers. For a second he thought he wasn't going to make it, then he was face down in the stream, gasping in bubbling water.
He crawled out onto the bank. The orcs, their leaders dead, had been routed. Felix pulled off his sodden cloak, wondering whether he was going to catch a chill from the cold mountain air.
"By Sigmar, that was well done. We were sore pressed there," said the tall, dark-haired man. He made the sign of the hammer over his chest as he spoke. He was handsome in a coarse way. His armour, although dented, was of the finest quality. The intensity of his stare made Felix uneasy.
"It would seem we owe you gentlemen our lives," said the mage. He too was richly dressed. His brocaded robes were trimmed with gold thread, scrolls covered in mystical symbols were held by rings set in it. His long blonde hair was cut in a peculiar fashion. From the centre of his flowing locks rose a crest not unlike Gotrek's save for the fact that it was undyed and cropped short. Felix wondered if it was the mark of some mystical order.
The armoured man's laughter boomed out. "It is the prophecy, Johann. Did not the god say one of our ancient brethren would aid us! Sigmar be praised! This is a good sign indeed."
Felix looked over at the trapper. He spread his hands and shrugged helplessly. A certain cynical humour was apparent in the way he raised an eyebrow.
"I am Felix Jaegar, of Altdorf, and this is my companion Gotrek Gurnisson, the Trollslayer," Felix said, bowing to the knight.
"I am Aldred Keppler, known as Fellblade, Templar-Knight of the Order of the Fiery Heart," said the armoured man. Felix suppressed a shudder. In his homeland, the Empire, the order was famed for the fanatic zeal with which they pursued their crusade against the goblin races. And those humans they considered heretics.
The knight gestured to the wizard. "This is my adviser on matters magical; Doctor Johann Zauberlich of the University of Nuln."
"At your service," said Zauberlich, bowing.
"I am Jules Gascoigne, once of Quenelles in Bretonnia. Although that was many a year ago," said the fur-clad man. He had a Bretonnian accent.

"Herr Gascoigne is a scout. I engaged him to guide us through these mountains," said Aldred. "I have a great work to perform at Carag Eight Peaks."
Felix and Gotrek exchanged glances. Felix knew the dwarf would rather they travelled alone in search of the lost treasure of the dwarven city. However, parting company from their chance-met companions would only arouse suspicion.
"Perhaps we should join forces," said Felix, hoping Gotrek would follow his line of reasoning. "We too are bound for the city of the eight peaks, and this road is far from safe."
"A capital suggestion," said the wizard.
"Doubtless your companion, he goes to visit his kin," said Jules, oblivious to the daggered stare Gotrek gave him. "There still is a small outpost of Imperial dwarfs there."
"We had best bury your companions," said Felix to fill the silence.
"Why so glum, friend Felix? Is it not a lovely night?" asked Jules Gascoigne sardonically, blowing on his hands to warm them against the bitter cold. Felix pulled his spare cloak up over his knees and extended his hands towards the small fire Zauberlich had lit with a word of power. He looked over at the Bretonnian, his face turned into a daemonic mask by the underlight.
"These mountains are chill and daunting," Felix replied. "Who knows what perils they hide?"
"Who indeed? We are close to the Darklands. Some say that is the very spawning ground of orcs and all other greenskin devils. Also, I have heard tales that these mountains are haunted."
Felix gestured towards the fire. "Do you think we should have lit this?" From nearby came Gotrek's reassuring snores and the regular rhythmic breathing of the others.
Jules chuckled. "It is a choice between evils, no? I have seen men freeze to death on nights like this. If anything attacks us, it is best that we have light to see by. The greenskins may be able to spot a man in the dark but we cannot, eh? No, I do not think the fire makes much difference. However I do not think this why you are sad."
He looked at Felix expectantly. Without really knowing why, Felix told the whole sorry tale of how he and Gotrek had joined the von Diehl expedition

to the Border Princes. Von Diehl and his retainers had sought peace in a new land and found only terrible death. He told of his meeting with his beloved Kirsten. The Bretonnian listened sympathetically. When Felix finished telling of Kirsten's death, Jules shook his head.
"Ah, it is a sorry world we live in, is it not?"
"It is indeed."
"Do not dwell on the past, my friend. It cannot be altered. In time all wounds heal."
"It doesn't seem that way to me."
They fell into silence. Felix looked over at the sleeping dwarf. Gotrek sat like a gargoyle, immobile, eyes shut but axe in hand. Felix wondered how the dwarf would take the scout's advice. Gotrek, like all dwarfs, constantly brooded on the lessons of the past. His sense of history drove him inexorably towards his future. He claimed that men had imperfect memories, that dwarfs' were better.
Is that why he seeks his doom, Felix wondered? Does his shame burn in him as strong now as at the moment he committed whatever crime he seeks to atone for? Felix pondered what it must be like to live with the past intruding so strongly into the present that it could never be forgotten. I would go mad, he thought.
He inspected his own grief and tried to recall it new-minted. It seemed that it had diminished by a particle, had been eroded by time and would continue to be so. He felt no better, knowing that he was doomed to forget, to have his memories become pale shadows. Perhaps the dwarfish way was better, he thought. Even the time he had spent with Kirsten seemed paler, more colourless.
During his watch Felix saw a greenish witchlight far upslope on the mountain. As he stared he felt a sense of dread. The light drifted about as if seeking something. In its midst was a vaguely human form. Felix had heard tales of the daemons haunting these mountains. He looked over at Gotrek, wondering whether he should wake him.
The light vanished. Felix watched for a long time but he saw no further sign. Perhaps it had been an after-image of the fire or a trick of the light and a tired mind. Somehow he doubted it.
In the morning he dismissed his suspicions. The party followed the road round the shoulder of the mountain and suddenly a new land lay spread out

before them under the grey, overcast sky.
They looked down into a long valley nestled in a basin between eight mountains. The peaks rose like the talons of a giant claw. In their palm lay a city.
Huge walls blocked the valley's entrance, built from blocks of stone taller than a man. Within the walls, next to a silver lake, sat a great keep. A town nestled beneath it. Long roads ran from the fortress to lesser towers at the base of each mountain. Drystone dykes criss-crossed the valley, creating a patchwork of overgrown fields.
Gotrek nudged Felix in the ribs and pointed towards the peaks.
"Behold," he said, a hint of wonder in voice. "Carag Zilfin, Carag Yar, Carag Mhonar and the Silverhorn."
"Those are the eastern mountains," said Aldred. "Carag Lhune, Carag Rhyn, Carag Nar and the White Lady guard the western approach."
Gotrek looked at the Sigmarian respectfully. "You speak truthfully, Templar. Long have these mountains haunted my dreams. Long have I wished to stand in their shadow."
Felix looked down on the city. There was a sense of enduring strength about the place. Carag Eight Peaks had been built from the bones of mountains to endure till the end of the world.
"It is beautiful," he said.
Gotrek looked at him with fierce pride. "In ancient times, this city was known as the Queen of the Silver Depths. It was the fairest of our realms and we grieved its fall most sorely."
Jules stared down at the massive walls. "How could it have fallen? All the armies of all the kings of men could be stood off in these mountains. Those fields could feed the population of Quenelles."
Gotrek shook his head and stared down into the city as intensely as if he were staring back into elder days.
"In pride we built Eight Peaks, at the zenith of our ancient power. It was a wonder to the world; more beautiful than Everpeak, open to the sky. A sign of our wealth and power, strong beyond the measure of dwarfs or elves or men. We thought it would never fall and the mines it guarded would be ours forever."
The Trollslayer spoke with a bitter, compelling passion that Felix had never heard in his voice before.

"What fools we were," Gotrek said. "What fools we were. In pride we built Eight Peaks, sure of our mastery of stone and the dark beneath the world. Yet even as we built the city the seeds of its doom were planted."
"What happened?" asked Felix.
"Our quarrel with the elves began; we scourged them from the forests and drove them from the lands. After that who were we to trade with? Commerce between our races had been the source of much wealth, tainted though it was. Worse, the cost in lives was more grievous than the cost to our merchants. The finest warriors of three generations fell in that bitter struggle."

"Still, your folk now controlled all the land between the World's Edge mountains and the Great Sea," said Zauberlich with a pedant's smugness. "So claims Ipsen in his book *Wars of the Ancients*."

The acid of Gotrek's laughter could have corroded steel. "Did we? I doubt it. While we had warred with our faithless allies the dark gathered its strength. We were weary of war when the black mountains belched forth their clouds of ash. The sky was overcast and the sun hid its face. Our crops died and our cattle sickened. Our people had returned to the safety of their cities; and from the very heart of our realm, from the place we imagined ourselves strongest, our foes burst forth."
He stopped speaking and in the silence Felix imagined he heard the caw of some distant bird.
"From tunnels far below any we had ever dug our enemies struck into the core of our fortresses. Through mines that had been the source of our wealth poured armies of goblins and rat-like Skaven and things far, far worse."
"What did your people do?" asked Felix.
Gotrek spread his arms wide and looked into their faces. "What could we do? We took up our weapons and went again to war. And a terrible war it was. Our battles with the elves had taken place under the sky, through field and forest. The new war was fought in cramped spaces in the long dark, with dreadful weapons and a ferocity beyond your imagining. Shafts were collapsed, corridors scoured with firethrowers, pits flooded. Our foes responded with poison gas and vile sorcery and the summoning of

daemons. Beneath where we now stand we fought with every resource we could muster, with all our weapons and all the courage desperation brings. We fought and we lost. Step by step we were driven from our homes."

Felix looked down at the placid city. It seemed impossible that what Gotrek described could ever have happened and yet there was something in the Trollslayer's voice that compelled belief. Felix imagined the desperate struggle of those long-ago dwarfs, their fear and bewilderment as they were pushed from the place they had believed was theirs. He pictured them fighting their doomed struggle with more-than-human tenacity.

"In the end it became obvious that we could not hold the city so the tombs of our kings and the treasure-vaults were sealed and hidden by cunning devices. We abandoned this place to our foes."

Gotrek glared at them. "Since then we have not been so foolish as to believe any place is secure from the dark."

All through the long day, as they approached the wall, Felix realized how much the old structures had suffered. What, from a distance, gave the impression of ageless strength and sureness became, on closer inspection, just as ruined as the road upon which they travelled.

The curtain wall blocking the road into the valley was four times as tall as a man and passed between steep, sheer cliffs. Signs of neglect were obvious. Moss grew between the cracks of the great stone blocks. The stones were pitted by rain channels and mottled with yellow lichen. Some were blackened as if by fire. A huge section of the wall had tumbled away.

His companions were silent. The desolation cast a pall over the party. Felix felt depressed and on edge. It was as if the spirits of antiquity watched over them, brooding over the tumbled remains of ancient grandeur. Felix's hand never strayed far from the hilt of his sword.

The cracked valves of the ancient gate had been wedged open. Someone had made a half-hearted attempt to clear the sign of the hammer and crown over eight peaks carved into the stone. Already the lichen was growing back into place.

"Someone has been here recently," said Jules, studying the gates closely.

"I can see how you earned your reputation as a scout," said Gotrek sarcastically.

"Stay where you are," boomed out an unfamiliar voice. "Unless you want to be filled with crossbow bolts."

Felix looked up at the parapet. He saw the helmeted heads of a dozen dwarfs looking down through the battlements. Each pointed a loaded crossbow at them.

"Welcome to Carag Eight Peaks," said their greybearded leader. "I hope you have good reason for trespassing on the domain of Prince Belegar."

Under grey-white clouds they marched through the city. It was a scene from after the day of judgement when the forces of Chaos returned to claim the world. Houses had tumbled and fallen into the streets. A fusty rotten smell came from many of the buildings. Evil-looking ravens cawed from the remains of old chimneys. Clouds of the gaunt, black birds soared above them.

The score of dwarfish warriors accompanying them were constantly on the alert. They scanned the doorways as if expecting ambush. Their crossbows were loaded and ready. They gave the impression of being in the middle of a battlefield.

Once they halted. The leader gestured for silence. Everyone stood listening. Felix thought he heard a scuttling sound but wasn't sure. He strained his eyes against the early evening gloom but could see no sign of trouble. The company leader gestured.

Two armoured dwarfs moved cautiously towards the corner and glanced around. The rest formed into a square. After a long tense moment the scouts gave the sign for all clear.

The quiet was broken by Gotrek's laughter. "Scared of a few gobbos?" he asked.

The leader glared at him. "There are worse things than goblins abroad on nights like this. Be assured of it." he said.

Gotrek ran his thumb down the blade of his axe, drawing blood. "Bring them on," he roared. "Bring them on!"

His shout echoed through the ruins and was swallowed by ominous silence. After that even Gotrek was quiet.

The city was larger than Felix had imagined; perhaps the size of Altdorf, greatest city of the Empire. Most of it was ruined, devastated by ancient wars.

"Surely your own people did not cause all this damage. Some of it seems quite recent," Felix said.

"Gobbos," Gotrek replied. "It is the curse of their kind that when they have no-one else to fight they fight amongst themselves. Doubtless after the city fell it was divided up among various warlords. Sure as elvish treachery, they'd fall out over the division of spoils.

"In addition there have been many attempts to recapture the city by my kin and men from the Border Princes. There's still a motherlode of silver down there."

He spat. "No attempt to hold the city has ever lasted. The dark has lain here. Where once it has been can never again be truly free of it."

They entered an area where the buildings had been partially repaired and which now seemed abandoned again. An attempt to re-colonize the city had failed, defeated by the sheer immensity of the ruins. Under the walls of the great keep the dwarfs seemed more relaxed. Their leader grumbled the occasional order to keep alert.

"Remember Lars," he said. "He and his men were killed while on the path to the great gate."

The dwarfs immediately reverted to their stern watchfulness.

Felix kept his hand near his sword.

"This is not a healthy place," whispered Jules Gascoigne.

As soon as they were through it, the keep's great gate closed with a crash like the fall of towers.

The hall was bleak, its walls covered by threadbare tapestries. It was lit by strange glowing gems that hung from a chandelier in the ceiling. On a throne of carved ivory inlaid with gold sat an aged dwarf, flanked by lines of mailed, blue-tunicked warriors. He gazed down with rheumy eyes, his glance flickering from the Trollslayer to the humans. Beside the ancient, a purple-robed female dwarf watched the whole proceeding with a strange, serene intensity. From a chain around her neck dangled an iron-bound book.

Felix thought he detected strain in the faces of the Imperial dwarfs. Perhaps dwelling in the haunted and run-down city had sapped their morale. Or perhaps it was something more; they seemed constantly to look over their shoulders. They started at the slightest noise.

"State your business, strangers," said the aged dwarf in a deep, proud, brittle voice. "Why have you come here?"

Gotrek glared back at him loutishly. "I am Gotrek Gurnisson, once of Everpeak. I have come to hunt troll in the dark beneath the world. The

manling Felix Jaegar is my blood-brother, a poet and rememberer. Do you seek to deny me my right?"
As he said the final sentence Gotrek hefted his axe. The dwarfish soldiers raised their hammers.
The ancient laughed. "No, Gotrek Gurnisson, I do not. Your path is an honourable one and I see no reason to stand in it. Although your choice of brethren is an ill one."
The dwarfish soldiers began to mutter amongst themselves. Felix felt baffled. It seemed as if Gotrek had broken some incomprehensible taboo.
"There is precedent," said the robed dwarfess. The sounds of consternation stopped. Felix expected her to speak further, to expand on what she had said but she did not. It seemed enough to the dwarfs that she had spoken.
"You both may pass, Gotrek, son of Gurni. Be careful of the gate you choose into the dark and beware lest your courage fail you." His voice held no hint of concern, only bitterness and secret shame.
Gotrek nodded curtly to the dwarf lord and withdrew to the back of the hall. Felix gave his best court bow, then followed the Trollslayer.
"State your business, strangers," said the ruler. Aldred went down on one knee before the throne and the others followed suit.
"I have come on a matter concerning my faith and an ancient pledge of aid between your folk and mine. My tale is a complex one and may take some time to tell."
The dwarf laughed nastily. Once again Felix sensed some secret knowledge that ate at the aged dwarf-lord. "Speak on. We are rich in no other commodity but time. We can spend it freely."
"Thank you. Am I correct in assuming that you are the same Prince Belegar who led the expedition to reclaim this city from the greenskins twenty years ago?"
Belegar nodded. "You are correct."
"Your guide was a dwarfish prospector called Faragrim, who found many secret ways back into the city below the Eight Peaks."
Once again the old dwarf nodded. Felix and Gotrek exchanged looks. It had been Faragrim who had told Gotrek about the troll-guarded treasure beneath the mountains.
"Your expedition was accompanied by a young knight of my order, a companion of Faragrim in his adventuring days. His name was Raphael."

"He was a true man and a foe of our enemies," said Belegar. "He went with Faragrim on his last expedition into the depths and never returned. When Faragrim refused to seek him I dispatched runners but they could not find his body."
"It is good to know you honoured him although I am downcast to learn that the blade which he bore was lost. It was a weapon of power and of great importance to my order."
"You are not the first who has come here to retrieve it," said the dwarf woman.
Aldred smiled. "Nevertheless I have sworn a vow to return the sword, Karaghul, to the chapter house of my order. I have cause to believe I will succeed." Belegar raised an eyebrow.
"Before setting out on my quest I fasted for two weeks and scourged my body with purgatives and the lash. On Sigmarzeit last I was favoured with a vision. My Lord appeared before me. He said he looked with favour on my mission and that the time was near for the enchanted blade to be drawn again."
"Further - he told me that I would be aided by one of our ancient brethren. I interpret this as meaning a dwarf, for so are your people always referred to in the Unfinished Book."
"I beseech you, noble Belegar, do not oppose my mission. My brother Raphael honoured the ancient vow of our faith, never to refuse aid to a dwarf, when he fell. It would be a mark of respect to allow me to recover his blade."
"Well spoken, man," said Belegar. Felix could see he was moved, as dwarfs invariably were by talk of honour and ancient oaths. Still there was a hint of bright malice in Belegar's gaze when he spoke. "I grant your petition. May you have more luck than your predecessors."
Aldred rose and bowed. "Could you provide us with a guide?"
Once again Belegar laughed and there was a strange, wild quality to his mirth. He cackled nastily. "I am sure Gotrek Gurnisson would be prepared to aid a quest so similar to his own."
Belegar rose from the throne and the robed woman moved to support him. He turned to hobble from the room. As he reached the rear exit of the chamber he turned and said: "You are dismissed!"

From the window of the tower where the dwarfs had housed them Felix looked down at the cobbled street. Outside snow fell in feathery flakes. Behind him the others argued quietly.

"I don't like it." Zauberlich said. "Who knows how vast an area lies below ground? We could search from now till the end of the world and not find the blade. I had thought the dwarfs guarded the blade."

"We must trust to faith," Aldred replied, calmly and implacably. "Sigmar wishes the blade to be found. We must trust that he will guide our hands to it."

An undertow of hysteria was evident in Zauberlich's voice. "Aldred, if Sigmar wished the blade returned why did he not place it in the hands of the three of your brethren who preceded us?"

"Who am I to guess the Lord's motives? Perhaps the time was not right. Perhaps this is a test of our faith. I will not be found lacking. *You* do not have to accompany us if you do not wish."

Felix noticed a cold green light in the distance. The sight of it filled him with dread. He beckoned for Jules to come over and take a look. By the time the Bretonnian arrived at the window there was nothing to be seen. The scout gave him a quizzical look. Embarrassed, Felix looked back at the discussion. Am I going mad, he wondered? He tried to dismiss the green light from his mind.

"Herr Gurnisson, what do you think?" asked Zauberlich. He turned to beseech the Trollslayer.

"I will be going down into the dark anyway. It does not bother me what you do. Settle your own quarrels."

"We have already lost three-quarters of the people we set out with," said Zauberlich, glancing from Jules Gascoigne to Aldred. "What purpose would it serve to throw away our own lives?"

"What purpose would it serve to give up, save to make our comrades' sacrifice meaningless?" replied the Templar. "If we give up now their deaths will be in vain. They believed that we should find Karaghul. They gave their lives willingly enough."

The Templar's fanaticism made Felix uneasy. Aldred talked too casually of men laying down their lives. Yet he also had a calm certainty that gave his

words compelling urgency. Felix knew warriors would follow such a man.
"You took the same oath as everyone else, Johann. If you wish to foreswear yourself now so be it, but the consequences will be on your own eternal soul."
Felix felt a wry sympathy for the mage. He himself had sworn to follow Gotrek while drunk, in a warm tavern in a civilized city, after the dwarf had saved his life. Peril had seemed remote then. He shook his head. It was easy to swear such oaths when you had no idea of the consequences. It was another to keep them when the path led to dismal places like Carag Eight Peaks.
Felix heard approaching footsteps. There was a knock and the door creaked open to reveal the female dwarf who had stood beside Belegar in the throne room. "I've come to warn you," she said in her low, pleasant voice.
"Warn us about what?" enquired Gotrek curtly.
"There are terrible things loose in the depths. Why do you think we live in such fear?" she said.
"I think you'd better come in," said the Trollslayer.
"I am Magda Freyadotter. I keep the Book of Remembering at the temple of Valaya. I speak with the voice of Valaya so you will know what I say is truth."
"Accepted," said Gotrek Gurnisson. "Speak truth then."
"In the dark unquiet spirits walk." She paused and looked around at them. Her gaze rested on the Trollslayer and lingered.
"When first we came here we numbered five hundred, with a few mannish allies. The only perils we faced were the orcs and their followers. We cleared this keep and parts of the upper city as a prelude to reclaiming our ancient mines."
"We made forays into the depths, seeking the vaults of our ancestors, knowing that if we could find them word would spread among the kinsfolk and more would flock here."
Felix understood the strategy. Word of a treasure find would lure more dwarfs here. He felt a little guilty. It had brought himself and Gotrek.
"We sent expeditions into the depths in search of the old places. Things had changed from the ancient plans we memorized as children. Tunnels had collapsed, ways were blocked, foul new passages dug by orcs inter-connected with our own."

"Did a dwarf called Faragrim lead any of these expeditions?" asked Gotrek.
"Yes," replied Magda.
Gotrek looked at Felix. "That much of what he claimed is true," said the Trollslayer.
"Faragrim was bold and sought deeper and further than all others. What did he tell you?"
Gotrek studied his feet. "That he had encountered the mightiest troll he had ever seen and fled."
Dwarfs are not good at lying, thought Felix. It seemed impossible that the priestess could not tell he was hiding something. But Magda didn't appear to notice anything amiss.
Felix thought back to the night back in Nuln, in the Eight Peaks tavern, when the awesomely drunken Faragrim had poured out his tale to Gotrek. The dwarfs had been so inebriated that they had even seemed to forget there was a human present and had talked excitedly in a mixture of Reikspiel and Khazalid. At the time Felix assumed the dwarfs were only attempting to outdo each other in telling tall tales. Now he wasn't sure.
"So that is what frightened him - we thought it was the ghosts," said Magda. "One day he returned from the depths. His beard had turned pure white. He spoke no word but simply departed."
"You spoke of terrors in the depths," interrupted Zauberlich.
"Yes. Our patrols below soon spoke of encountering ghosts of ancient kin. The spirits howled and wailed and begged us to free them from the bondage of Chaos. Soon our early successes were reversed. What dwarf can bear the sight of kinsmen torn from the bosom of the ancestral spirits? Our forces lost heart. Prince Belegar led a mighty expedition to seek the source of evil. His force was destroyed by the lurkers in the depths. Only he and a few trusted retainers returned. They have never spoken of what they found. Most of our surviving folk departed to their homelands. Now barely a hundred of us are left to hold this keep."
The colour drained from Gotrek's face. Felix had never seen the Trollslayer display such fear before. Gotrek could face any living creature boldly but this talk of ghosts had leeched away his courage. The worship of their ancestors must be very important to his people, thought Felix with sudden insight.

"I have warned you," said the priestess. "Do you now still wish to go below?"
Gotrek stared off into the fire. All eyes in the room were on him. Felix felt that if Gotrek abandoned his quest then even Aldred might give up. The Templar seemed convinced that the Trollslayer was the dwarf of his prophecy.
Gotrek clutched his axe so tightly that his knuckles were white. He took a deep breath. He seemed to will himself to speak.
"Man or spirit, alive or dead, I fear it not," he said quietly in a voice that was not convincing. "I will go below. There is a troll I have to meet."
"Well spoken," said Magda. "I will lead you to the entrance of the realm below."
Gotrek bowed. "It would be an honour."
"Tomorrow then," she said and rose to go. Gotrek held the door for her. After she had departed he slumped into the chair. He laid down his axe and clutched at the armrests as if he feared he would fall over. He looked very afraid.
A huge doorway gaped in the side of the mountain. Above it, rising from the rock, was a great window set in the side of the mountain. The window was roofed with red-slate tiles, many of which had fallen in. It was as if a keep had been built and then sunk beneath the earth so that only the tallest parts protruded above the ground.
"This is the Silvergate," said Magda. "The Silverway runs to the Upper Granaries and the Long Stairs. I believe the Way is clear. After that, beware!"
"Thank you," said Felix. Gotrek nodded to the priestess. Aldred, Jules and Zauberlich bowed. The men looked very sombre.
They began to check their lanterns and the supply of oil. They had plenty of provisions. All their weapons were oiled and ready.
Magda reached within the sleeves of her robe. She produced a tube of parchment and handed it to Gotrek. He unrolled it, gave it a quick glance and bowed from the waist until his crest touched the ground.
"May Grungni, Grimniir and Valaya watch over you all," said Magda and made a peculiar sign of benediction over them.
"The blessing of Sigmar upon you and your clan," replied Aldred Fellblade.

"Let's go," said Gotrek Gurnisson. They hefted their gear and passed under the arch. Felix could see that it was marked with old dwarfish runes that time had yet to erode.

As they passed below they were cast into shadow and chill. Felix could not repress a shiver.

Light from the great window illumined the way down into the gloom. Felix marvelled at the precision of dwarfish engineering. At the brow of the slope he turned and looked back. The priestess and her escort stood there. He waved to her and she raised an arm in farewell. Then they began the downward way and the lands above were hidden from view. Felix wondered if any of them would ever see daylight again.

"What did the priestess give you, Herr Gurnisson?" asked Johann Zauberlich. Gotrek thrust the document into the magician's hand.

"It's a map of the city copied from the mastermap in the temple of Valaya the Rememberer. It covers all the ground that Prince Belegar's expeditions explored."

By the light of the glowing crystals overhead the mage inspected it, then scratched his head. Felix looked over his shoulder and saw only a scrawl of tiny runes connected with lines in different coloured ink. Some of the lines were thick, others were thin and some were dotted.

"It's like no map I've ever seen," said the mage. "I can't make head nor tail of it."

Gotrek's lips curled into a sneer. "I would be surprised if you could. It's written in the rune-code of the Engineers' Guild."

"We are in your hands and Sigmar's, Herr Gurnisson. Lead on," said the Templar.

Felix tried to count the number of steps he took but gave up at eight hundred and sixty two. He noticed the passages leading of the Silverway and began to have some idea of the scale of the dwarfish city.

It was like the floating mountains of ice mariners reported in the Sea of Claws. Nine-tenths of it was below the surface. The scale overwhelmed any of the works of man Felix had ever seen. It was a humbling experience.

The way passed many openings in the wall. Some were still partially bricked up. The brickwork looked recent. Something had chipped through it using very crude tools. There was a smell of rot in the air.

"Grain silos," explained Gotrek. "Used to feed the city in winter. Looks like gobbos have been at Belegar's stores though."
"If there are any goblins near, they will soon taste my steel," said Aldred Fellblade.
Jules and Felix exchanged worried looks. They were not as keen as the Templar and the Trollslayer to get to grips with whatever dwelled down here.
Felix lost track of time but he guessed it was half an hour before they left the Silverway and entered a hallway as large as the Koenigspark in Altdorf. It was lit by great slots in the ceiling. Motes of dust danced in a dozen columns of light taller than the towers of Nuln. The sound of their steps echoed, disturbing strange shadowy, fluttering things that lurked by the ceiling.
"The Square of Merscha," said Gotrek, in a voice that held a note of wonder. He gazed into the hall with a strange mixture of hatred and pride. "Where Queen Hilga's personal troops turned and stood off an army of goblins a hundred times their number. They gave the Queen and many of the citizens time to escape. Never did I expect to lay eyes on it. Walk carefully. Every stone has been sanctified with the blood of heroes."
Felix looked at the Trollslayer. He saw a new person. Since they had entered the city Gotrek had changed. He stood taller. He no longer cast furtive looks around and muttered to himself. For the first time since Felix had met him the dwarf seemed at ease. It's as if he's come home, thought Felix.
Now it's we men who are out of place, he realized, suddenly aware of the immense weight of stone that lay between him and the sun. He had to fight against the fear that the whole mountain, held in place only by the fragile craft of those ancient dwarfs, would fall in on him, burying him forever. He sensed the closeness of the dark, of the old places beneath the mountains that had never known daylight. The seeds of terror were planted in his heart. He looked out across a square larger than any structure he had ever known and he knew that he could not cross it. Absurdly, far below the surface of the earth, he began to feel agoraphobic. He did not want to pass below that vaulted ceiling for fear that the artificial sky would fall. He felt dizzy and his breathing came in ragged gasps.

A reassuring hand fell on his shoulder. Felix looked down to see that Gotrek stood by him. Slowly the urge to run back up the Silverway passed and he felt some semblance of calm return. He looked back out over the square of Merscha, overcome with awe.

"Truly, yours are a mighty people, Gotrek Gurnisson," he said.

Gotrek looked up at him and there was sadness in his eyes. "Aye, manling, that we were, but the craft which created this hall is beyond us now, We no longer have the number of masons needed to build it."

Gotrek turned and looked back into the hall then, he shook his head. "Ach, manling, you have some inkling of how far we have fallen. The days of our glory are behind us. Once we created all of this. Now we huddle in a few shrunken cities and wait for the end of the world. The day of the dwarf has gone, never to return. We crawl like maggots through the work of elder days and the glory of what once was ours mocks us."

He gestured out at the hall with his axe, as if he wished he could demolish it with one blow.

"This is what we must measure ourselves against!" he bellowed. The startled men looked at him. The echoes mocked him. Somewhere among them Felix Jaegar thought he heard the sounds of furtive movement. When he looked towards the noise he saw winking amber eyes receding slowly into the dark.

As they progressed, the stone of the undercity took on a peculiar greenish tinge. They moved away from the lit hall into shadowy gloom, faintly illuminated by dim, flickering glowjewels. Occasionally Felix heard a tapping sound. Gotrek stopped and placed a hand against the wall. Out of curiosity Felix did the same. He felt a small distant vibration pass through the stone.

Gotrek glanced up at him. "Gobbo wall-drumming," he said. "They know we're here. Best speed our pace. It'll confuse any scouts."

Felix nodded. The walls glittered like jade. He could see fat red-eyed rats move away from the light. Their hides were pure black. Gotrek cursed and stamped at the nearest one but it evaded him.

He shook his head. "Even here, so close to the surface, we see the taint of Chaos. It must be worse down below."

They came to a stairway running down into the dark. Great columns had fallen away. Piles of masonry lay in a heap. The stair itself seemed

crumbled. They disturbed a nest of flitterwings. The small bats took off like scraps of shadow and fluttered about. Uneasily Felix wondered how safe the stairs were.

They descended through galleries marked with the signs of orcish despoliation. Rats scuttled ahead of them from nests under broken stonework.

Gotrek gestured to halt and stood sniffing the air. From behind them Felix thought he heard the sound of footfalls further up the stair.

"I smell gobbos," said the Trollslayer.

"They are behind us, I think," said Jules.

"All around us," said Gotrek. "This place has been used as an orc road for many years."

"What shall we do?" asked Felix, exchanging worried looks with Zauberlich.

"Push on," said Gotrek, consulting the map. "We're going the way we want to anyway."

Felix glanced back. He suspected they were being herded into a trap. Things look bad, he thought. Our way back to the surface has been cut off already unless Gotrek knows another route.

The Trollslayer's expression assured him that Gotrek was giving no thought to such matters. The dwarf glanced around worriedly as if expecting to see a ghost.

Their pursuers' footsteps came ever closer. From ahead, echoing through the galleries, they heard a bellow that was deeper and louder than any orc's.

"What was that?" asked Zauberlich.

"Something big," said Aldred. Gotrek ran his thumb along the blade of his axe till a jewel of blood glistened on its blade.

"Good," he said.

"It must be close," said Felix nervously, wondering if his face was as ashen as the magician's and the scout's.

"Hard to say," said Gotrek. "These tunnels distort sound. Amplify it too. It could be miles away."

The roar came again and there was the sound of running feet, as if goblins scuttled to obey an order.

"It's closer this time," said Felix.

"Calm yourself, manling. As I said, it's probably miles away."

It stood waiting in the next hall, near the foot of the long stairway. They passed under an archway carved with skeletal daemon's heads and saw it; a huge ogre, half again as tall as and four times the bulk of Aldred. A crest of hair emerged from its scaly scalp. Like Gotrek's crest, it was dyed. Unlike Gotrek's, it was patterned in alternating black and white bands. A huge spiked armguard whose fist was a long wicked scythe covered its right arm. An enormous spiked ball and chain dangled from its left hand. It looked as though it could demolish a castle wall.

The creature grinned, revealing spiked metal teeth. Behind it hunched a company of goblins, green skins glistening. They clutched metal shields emblazoned with the emblem of the skull. Scabs and boils and pock marks marked their leering, ugly faces. Some wore spiked collars round their necks. Some had metal rings pinching the flesh of their torsos. Their eyes were red and without pupil. Felix wondered if this was another sign of the taint of Chaos.

He glanced around. To his right was tumbled masonry. It looked as if old dwarfish stonework had been brought down and cleared to make way for newer and cruder carvings. Iron chains were set in the wall near him. To the left was a great chimney carved so that the fireplace was the maw of a gaping daemonic head. Brownish blood stained the stone. Have we stumbled into some goblin temple? wondered Felix. Just what we need, a man-hungry ogre and a horde of goblin fanatics. Well, he consoled himself, at least things can't get any worse.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to look back up the stairs. Down it poured another company of goblins led by a burly orc. In its left hand it clutched a scimitar and in its right it held a standard whose banner depicted a stylised representation of the tusked maw of the cursed moon, Morrslieb. Stuck on the top of the standard was an embalmed human head. Behind the bearer came more goblins armed with maces and spears and axes.

Felix looked at Jules. The Bretonnian gave a devil-may-care shrug. What a terrible place to die, thought Felix. For a long moment the three groups exchanged glares. There was a brief peaceful silence.

"For Sigmar!" cried Aldred, raising his great sword high and charging down the stairs with surprising nimbleness for a man garbed in plate.

"Tanugh Aruk!" bellowed Gotrek, as he followed. Overhead the glowjewels seemed to glow briefly brighter. "Kill the goblin-scum!"

Felix brought his blade to the guard position. Beside him Jules Gascoigne stood at the ready. The standard bearer glared at them but made no move to come closer. Felix was reluctant to attack the goblins up the stair. It was a standoff.

Behind him Felix heard the clash of weapons and the screaming of battle-cries. The foul orc-reek was strong in his nostrils. Iron-shod feet rang on the stairs behind him. He whirled just in time to parry a mace swung with considerable force by a greenskin warrior. The force of the impact jarred up his arm.

He gritted his teeth and stabbed out. His blade cut a glittering arc through the gloom. The goblin skipped back and Felix almost overbalanced. He moved as rapidly as he could down the stairs, hampered by the uncertain footing.

"Jules, hold the stair!" he shouted.

"Anything for a friend."

Felix pushed on after the goblin. He had some trouble pursuing his nimble foe over the broken ground. The gobbo stuck out its tongue and yelled tauntingly. Overcome by stinging anger, Felix rushed forward and tripped. He fell to his knees and rolled, feeling pain where he had skinned flesh from his knees. Something scurried over him. Tiny claws scratched him. I've disturbed a nest of rats, he thought. For a moment he was disoriented. As he struggled to his feet he caught sight of the tableau of the battle.

Gotrek chopped into the chest of his foe. Mail exploded outward from the goblin's breast where the huge axe impacted. Aldred Fellblade charged within the sweep of the ogre's huge wrecking ball and stabbed upward through the creature's stomach. Felix saw his blade protruding from the ogre's back. Goblins swept past Felix to get at the dwarf, their ancient foe. Just out of reach of the struggle Johann Zauberlich produced a scroll and chanted a spell. A ball of fire appeared in his left hand. Black rats swarmed everywhere. Shadowy flitterwings swooped agitatedly.

Felix fought for balance. His gaze shifted to Jules Gascoigne on the stair, bravely standing off a number of heavily armed foes. He had already killed one but more entered behind another standard bearer.

Pain surged through Felix as a club smashed into his shoulder. Flashing silver stars filled his field of vision. He fell on his face, letting go of his sword. Above him stood the goblin, its club raised, a leer of triumph on its

face. Move, damn you, Felix told his protesting limbs as the club whistled down. It loomed like the trunk of a falling tree, moving with painful slowness to the man's panic-honed senses.

At the last moment Felix rolled to one side and the club hit rock with a loud crack. Felix twisted and lashed out with one foot, sending the goblin flying. Desperately Felix fumbled for his sword, feeling huge relief as his fingers closed over its hilt.

He dived forward, impaling the goblin before it could rise. The thing cursed as it died. Suddenly a titanic flash blinded Felix. He reeled back, covering his eyes as an inferno erupted before him. Hot air washed over his face. The air stank of sulphur. I'm dead, dead and in hell, he thought. Then understanding filled his mind. Zauberlich had unleashed his fireball.

He looked around. Gotrek and Aldred were clearing a path through the demoralized goblins. Behind them rushed the scout and the wizard. Jules grabbed Felix by the arm.

"Come on," he yelled. "We've got to get out while they're confused."

They ran on down the long corridor. From behind them came the sounds of conflict.

"What's happening back there?" he yelled.

"Different gobbo tribes," cackled Gotrek. "With any luck they'll slit each others throats while they fight to see who gets to eat us."

Felix stared down into the chasm. Stars glittered in its depths. Aldred and Gotrek glanced back down the corridor. Jules prowled out onto the corroded metal bridge. Zauberlich leaned against a cast-iron gargoyle, panting heavily.

"I fear I was not intended for the adventurous life," he gasped. "My studies did not prepare me for all this strenuous exercise."

Felix smiled. The magician reminded him of his old professors. The only conflicts they ever fought were struggles over the correct interpretation of the finer points of classical poetry. He was surprised and ashamed to find himself so contemptous of those old men. Once it had been his ambition to become just like them. Had the adventuring life changed him so much?

Zauberlich was inspecting the gargoyle curiously. Felix revised his opinion of the wizard. He only superficially resembled those elderly academics. None of them would have survived the road to Carag Eight Peaks. The fact Zauberlich's sorcery was so adroit spoke volumes about the man's

determination and intelligence. Magic was no art for a weakling or a coward. It held its own hidden perils. Curiosity overcame Felix. He wanted to ask the mage how he had become involved with the Templar.

"I think we must have lost the goblins," shouted Aldred. He and Gotrek clumped towards the others. The questions Felix had been about to ask the sorcerer died on his lips. As they crossed the bridge Felix sensed he would never get another chance to ask them.

They gazed down the long dark corridor. For the first time the light from the glowjewels had failed. Felix had grown so accustomed to the dim greenish light that its sudden failure shocked him. It felt as if the sun had gone in the middle of the day. Gotrek pushed on into the dark, seemingly oblivious to the lack of light. Felix wondered at how well the dwarf could see.

"Best break out the lanterns," said Gotrek, shaking his head. "The lights have been vandalized. Damn gobbos. Those jewels should have glowed forever but they just couldn't leave them alone. They can never be replaced now, the art has been lost."

Jules prepared a lantern. Zauberlich lit it with a word. Felix watched them, feeling redundant until he heard Gotrek moan behind him. Felix turned to look.

Far down the corridor there was a faint greenishly glowing figure. It was an old bearded dwarf. Light poured from it and through it. It looked transparent, as tangible as a soap bubble. The ghostly figure wailed, a thin, reedy sound, and advanced towards Gotrek, arms outstretched. The Trollslayer stood transfixed. Terror overwhelmed Felix. He recognized the quality of the light. He had seen it before, on the mountainside and in the city above.

"Sigmar protect us," muttered Aldred. Felix heard the Templar's blade ring as he pulled it from the scabbard.

Felix felt his hair stir as the ancient dwarf advanced. The air seemed cold. His flesh tingled. The figure's lips moved and Felix thought he heard a gibbering faraway voice. Gotrek stirred and moved forward, axe held up as if to ward off a blow.

The ghost redoubled its frantic pleas. Gotrek shook his head as if he did not understand. The ghost hurried to meet him, looking over its shoulder as if pursued by a distant, invisible enemy.

Horror filled Felix. The ghost was falling apart. It was like a mist before a strong wind, parts of it just peeled away and vanished. Before Gotrek could reach it, it vanished entirely. As it went Felix heard a distant, despairing wail. It was the cry of a damned soul, vanishing into hell.

As Gotrek returned Felix saw the stunned look on his face. The Trollslayer looked appalled and bewildered. A tear gleamed beneath his single eye.

They hurried down the darkened corridor. Even after they reached an area where the glowjewels gleamed no-one seemed in a hurry to extinguish the lantern. For long hours thereafter the Trollslayer never said a word.

Felix was tempted to drink from a spring flowing into the ancient carved trough. He bent over the greenly glowing water when he felt strong hands knot his hair and pull him back.

"Are you mad, manling? Can you not see the water is tainted?" Felix was about to object when Zauberlich looked down into the water and inspected the greenish glowing flecks.

"Warpstone?" he said, in a surprised tone. Felix felt his blood run cold. All he had ever heard about the dread substance was that it was the pure essence of Chaos sought after by evil alchemists in certain grisly tales.

"What did you say, mage?" asked Gotrek curtly.

"I think this could be warpstone. It has the greenish luminescence that certain scholarly tomes attribute to that unpleasant substance. If there is even a trace of warpstone in the water that might account for the high level of mutation hereabouts."

"There are old tales of the Skaven poisoning the wells," said Gotrek. "Would even they be so foul as to do it with warpstone?"

"I have heard it said that the Skaven subsist on warpstone. Perhaps this served a dual purpose. It gave them sustenance and made the wells unusable by their foes."

"You seem very knowledgable in the ways of Chaos, Herr Zauberlich," said Felix suspiciously.

"The Doctor and I have hunted our share of witches," said Aldred Feilblade. "It's a task that obliges you to learn much strange lore. Are you implying any companion of mine could be tainted by such foulness as trafficking with the Ruinous Powers?"

Felix shook his head. He had no wish to cross a warrior as deadly as the Templar. "My apologies for my unjust suspicions."

Gotrek guffawed. "No need to apologize. Eternal vigilance is necessary in all foes of the dark."
Aldred nodded in agreement. It seemed the Trollslayer had found a kindred spirit.
"We had best move on." said Jules Gascoigne, looking nervously back the way they had come.
"Best stick to drinking what we brought with us, manling," said Gotrek as they moved off.
"What is this stuff?" asked Felix nervously. His question echoed off into the distance. Jules shone lantern light into the dark caverns. Giant, misshapen fungi cast long shadows against the white mould-covered walls. Spores drifted in the lantern's beam.
"Once we cultivated mushrooms for food," muttered Gotrek. "Now it looks like another victim of mutation."
The Trollslayer marched into the room. His boots left prints in the sodden carpet of mould. Somewhere in the distance Felix thought he heard running water.
Foot-long splinters of whiteness detached themselves from the walls, enlarging as they came. They hurtled towards the startled adventurers. Gotrek chopped into one with his axe. It gave with a squishing sound. More and more splinters left the wall like a blizzard of giant snowflakes. Felix found himself surrounded by soft bloated bodies and fluttering wings.
"Moths," shouted Zauberlich. "They're moths. They're trying to get at the light. Kill it."
It went dark. Felix had a last vision of Gotrek, his body covered in the giant insects, then he stood within a whirling snowstorm of wingbeats. His flesh crawling at the moths' touch. Then all was silence, "Back out," Gotrek whispered, revulsion showing in every syllable. "We'll find another way."
Felix paused to look back down the long hallway, wishing that the glowjewels were brighter. He was convinced he had heard something. He reached out and touched the smooth cold stone of the wall. Faint vibration thrummed through it. Wall-drumming.
He strained his eyes. In the distance he could make out vague shapes. One carried a huge banner with what seemed to be a human head on top. He pulled his sword from its scabbard.

"Looks like they found us again," he said, There was no reply. The others had disappeared round the corner. Felix realized that they had kept marching when he paused. He ran to catch up.

Filled with dread, Felix opened one eye. He emerged from slumber. It was Gotrek's watch but he thought he heard eerie voices. He looked around the small chamber and his hair stood on end. His heartbeat sounded loud and fast in his ears and he thought that he was going to faint dead away. All power had fled from his limbs.

The strange green glow lit the area. It washed over the Trollslayer's haggard face, making him look like some ghastly zombie. Gotrek's shadow loomed huge and menacing on the wall. The entity from which the light emerged was on its knees in front of the Trollslayer, arms outstretched beseechingly. It was the ghost of some ancient dwarfish woman.

It was insubstantial and yet it had the presence of ages, as if it were a manifestation of the elder times made real. Its garb was regal and the face had once possessed authority. Its cheeks seemed sunken and the flesh seemed to have sloughed away and was pock-marked, as if riddled with maggots. The eyes that lurked under cave-like brows were pools of shadow in which witch-lights burned. It was as if the ghost were being eaten away by some unworldly disease, a cancer of the spirit.

The aspect of the thing filled Felix with terror, and its suffering only intensified his awful fear. It hinted that there were things waiting beyond the grave from which even death was not an escape, powers which could seize a spirit and torment it. Felix had always been afraid of death but now he was aware that there were worse things. He felt himself on the edge of sanity, hoping for the release from this terrible knowledge that madness might bring.

Nearby Jules Gascoigne whimpered like a child enmeshed in a nightmare. Felix tried to avert his eyes from the scene being played out before him but could not; a compulsion lay on him. He was horribly fascinated by the confrontation.

Gotrek raised his axe and put it between him and the troubled spirit. Was it his imagination, Felix wondered, or did the runes that inlaid the huge blade glow with internal fire?

"Begone, abomination," rasped the Trollslayer in a voice barely above a whisper. "Depart, I am yet among the living."

The thing laughed. Felix realized that it made no sound. He heard its voice within his head.
"Aid us, Gotrek Gurnisson. Free us. Our tombs are desecrated and a terrible warping power rests within our halls." The spirit wavered and seemed about to dissipate like mist. With a visible effort it maintained its form.
Gotrek tried to speak but could not. The great muscles in his neck stood out, a vein throbbed at his temple.
"We have committed no crime," said the spirit in a voice that held ages of suffering and loneliness. "We had departed to join our ancestral spirits when we were brought back by the desecration of our resting place. We were wrenched from eternal peace."
"How can this be?" asked Gotrek, in a voice that held both wonder and terror. "What can tear a dwarf from the bosom of the ancestors?"
"What else has the strength to upset the order of the universe, Trollslayer? What else but Chaos?"
"I am but a single warrior. I cannot stand against the Old Dark Powers."
"No need. Cleanse our tomb of that which lies there and we will be free. Will you do this, Gotrek, son of Gurni? If you do not we shall not be able to rejoin our kin. We will gutter and vanish like candleflames in a storm. Even now we fade. Only a few of us are left."
Gotrek looked at the anguished spirit. Felix saw reverence and pity flicker across his face. "If it is within my power, I will free you."
A smile passed across the spirit's ravaged face. "Others we have asked, including our descendant Belegar. They were too fearful to aid us. In you I find no flaw."
Gotrek bowed and the spirit reached out a glowing hand and touched his brow. It seemed to Felix as if sudden insight flooded into the Trollslayer. The ghost dwindled and faded as if receding to a vast distance. Soon it was gone.
Felix looked around at the others. They were all awake and gazing at the dwarf in astonishment. Aldred looked at the Trollslayer with something akin to reverence. Gotrek hefted his axe.
"We have work to do," he said in a voice like stone grinding against stone.
Like a man in a trance, Gotrek Gurnisson led them down the long corridors in the depths below the old city. They passed into a area of wide, low tunnels lined by defaced statues.

"Greenskins have been here," Felix observed to Jules Gascoigne.
"Not recently, my friend. Those statues were not broken recently. See the lichen growing on the breaks. I like not the way it glows."
"There is something evil about this place. I can sense it," said Zauberlich, tugging at the sleeve of his robe and peering around nervously. "There is an oppressive presence in the air."
Felix wondered whether he could sense it too or whether he was simply receptive to his companion's forebodings. They turned a corner and moved along a way lined by mighty arches. Strange runic patterns were carved between each archway.
"I hope your friend is not leading us into some trap laid by the Dark Powers," whispered the magician quietly. Felix shook his head. He was convinced of the spirit's sincerity. But then again, he thought, what do I know of such things? He was so outwith the realms of his normal experience that all he could do was trust to the flow of events. He gave a fatalistic shrug. Things were beyond his control.
"I hate to bother you, but our pursuers have returned," said Jules. "Why have they not attacked? Are they afraid of this area?"
Felix looked back towards the redly glowing eyes of the greenskin company. He made out the hideous standard.
"Whatever they were afraid of, they seem to have plucked up courage now."
"Maybe they've been herding us here for sacrifice," said Zauberlich.
"Look on the bright side," said the scout.
Eventually they passed over another chasm-bridge and into a long corridor lined with decorative arches. Gotrek halted at a huge open archway. He shook his head like a man waking up from a dream.
Felix studied the arch. He saw a great groove made for a barrier to slide along. On closer reflection Felix thought that if the opening were closed it would be invisible, blending into the pattern of the way along which they passed. Felix lit his lantern, driving back the shadowy darkness.
Beyond the opening lay an enormous vault, lined on either side with great sarcophagi carved to resemble the figures of sleeping dwarfs of noble aspect. To the right were males, to the left females. Some of the tops of the stone coffins had been removed. In the centre of the chamber was a huge pile of gold and old banners mingled with yellowing, cracked bones. From

the middle of the heap protruded the hilt of a sword, carved in the shape of a dragon.
Felix was reminded of the cairn they had built for Aldred's followers along the road to the city. A hideous stench came through the arch and made Felix want to gag.
"Look at all that gold," said the Bretonnian. "Why has no greenskin taken it?"
"Something protects it," said Felix. A question crossed his mind. "Gotrek, this is one of the hidden tombs of your people you spoke of, isn't it?"
The dwarf nodded.
"Why is it open? Surely it would have been sealed?"
Gotrek scratched his head and stood deep in thought for a moment. "Faragrim opened it," he said angrily. "He was once an engineer. He would know the rune-codes. Ghosts only started appearing after he left the city. He abandoned the tomb to despoliation. He knew what would happen."
Felix agreed. The prospector was greedy and would certainly have ransacked the tomb if he could. He had found the lost horde of Carag Eight Peaks. If that was true, then was the other part of his story true as well? Had he fled from the troll? Did he leave the Templar Raphael to fight the monster alone?
While they talked Aldred entered the tomb and walked over to the treasure heap. He turned and Felix saw the look of triumph on the Templar's lean fanatic face. No, get out, Felix wanted to shout.
"I have found it," he cried. "The lost blade Karaghul. I have found it! Sigmar be praised!"
From behind the heap of treasure a huge horn-headed shadow loomed, twice as tall as Aldred, broader than it was tall. Before Felix had time to shout a warning, it tore off the Templar's head with one sweep of a mighty claw. Gore spurted. The thing lurched forward, pushing through the mound of treasure with irresistible power.
Felix had heard tales of trolls, and perhaps once this had been one. Now it was hideously changed. It had a gnarly hide covered in huge, dripping tumours and three enormously muscular arms, one of which terminated in a pincer claw. Growing from its left shoulder, like some obscene fruit, was a small babyish head which glared at them with wise malign eyes. It chittered

horridly in a language that Felix could not recognize. Pus dribbled down its chest from a huge leech mouth set below its neck.
The bestial head roared and the echoes reverberated through the long hall. Felix saw an amulet of glowing greenish-black stone hanging from a chain around its neck. Warpstone, he thought, placed there deliberately.
He did not blame Faragrim for running. Or Belegar. He stood paralyzed by fear and indecision. From beside him he heard the sound of Zauberlich being sick. He knew warpstone had created this thing. He thought of what Gotrek had said about the long-ago war beneath the mountains.
Someone had been so insane as to chain warpstone to the troll, to deliberately induce mutation. Perhaps it was the rat-men Skaven that Gotrek had mentioned. The troll had been down here since the war, a festering abomination changing and growing far from the light of day. Perhaps it was the desecration of their tombs by this warpstone-spawned monstrosity which had caused the dwarfish ghosts to walk? Or perhaps it was the presence here of the warpstone, of pure undiluted Chaos.
The thoughts reverberated through his mind as the roar of the mad thing echoed through the vault. He stood unable to move, transfixed by horror, as the thing came ever closer. Its stench filled his nostrils. He heard the hideous sucking of its leech mouth. It loomed out of the gloom, its pain-racked, bestial face hellishly underlit by its glowing amulet.
The troll was going to reach him and slay him and he could not make himself do anything about it. He would welcome death, having confronted this manifestation of the insanity of the universe.
Gotrek Gurnisson leapt forward between him and the monster, hunched in his fighting crouch. His long shadow swept out behind him in the green light so that he stood at the head of a pool of darkness, axe held high, runes shimmering with witchfire.
The Chaos-troll halted and peered down at him, as if astonished by the temerity of this small creature. Gotrek glared up at it and spat.
"Time to die, troll," he said and lashed out with his axe, opening up a terrible wound in its chest. The creature continued to stand there, studying the wound in fascination. Gotrek struck again at its ankle, attempting to hamstring it. Once again he drew green blood. The creature did not fall.
With blinding speed its huge pincer descended, clicking shut. It would have snipped off the Trollslayer's head if he had not ducked. The troll bellowed

angrily and lashed out with a taloned hand. Somehow Gotrek managed to deflect it with a sweep of his axe. He avoided the hail of blows that rained down on him.

The Trollslayer and the troll circled warily, each looking for an opening. Felix noted to his horror that the wounds Gotrek had inflicted were knitting together. As they did so they made a sound like slobbering mouths closing.

Jules Gascoigne rushed forward and stabbed the troll with his sword. The blade pierced the creature's leg and remained there. As the Bretonnian struggled to pull it out, the monster hit him with a back-handed sweep that sent him flying. Felix heard ribs break and the scout's head hit the wall with a terrible crack. Jules lay still in a spreading pool of his own blood.

While the creature was distracted Gotrek leapt in and struck it a glancing blow to the shoulder. He sheared off the babyish head. It rolled over to near Felix's feet and lay screaming. Felix managed to put down the lantern, draw his sword and bring the blade down, chopping the head in two. It began to rejoin. He continued to hack until his sword was notched, blunted then broken from hitting the stone floor. He still could not kill the thing.

"Stand back," he heard Zauberlich say. He leapt to one side. The air suddenly blazed. It stank of sulphur and burned meat. The baby head was silent and did not heal.

As if sensing a new threat, the troll moved past Gotrek and grabbed the mage in its giant pincer. Felix saw the look of terror on Zauberlich's face as he was raised on high. Zauberlich struggled to cast a spell. A fireball erupted, and the shadows fled briefly. The monster screamed. With a reflexive action it closed the claw, chopping the mage in two.

The wizard fell to the ground, clothes blazing. Black despair overwhelmed Felix. Zauberlich could have hurt the thing, burned it with purifying fire. Now he was dead. Gotrek could only hack futilely at the troll but its Chaos-enhanced powers of healing made it all but invulnerable. They were doomed.

Felix's shoulders slumped. There was nothing he could do. The others had died in vain. Their quest had failed. The spirits of the dwarfish rulers would continue to wander in torment. It was all futile.

He looked at Gotrek's sweating face. Soon the Trollslayer would tire and be unable to dodge the creature's blows. The dwarf knew this too but he did

not give up. Renewed determination filled Felix. I will not give up either. He looked over at the burning body of the magician.
The fire had become more intense, more so than if simply the man's clothes were burning. Why was that, Felix wondered?
Realization dawned. The mage had been carrying spare flasks of lantern-oil in his coat. Swiftly Felix stripped off his pack and fumbled for an oil-flask.
"Keep it busy!" he yelled to Gotrek, unstoppering the flask. Gotrek uttered a dwarfish curse. Felix flicked the flask at the thing, showering it with oil. The thing ignored him as it sought to pin down Gotrek. The dwarf redoubled his efforts, chopped away like a madman. Felix emptied a second flask over it and then a third, always keeping to the monster's blind side.
"Whatever you're going to do manling, do it quickly!" yelled the Trollslayer.
Felix ran over and picked up his lantern. Sigmar, guide my hand, he prayed as he threw the lamp at the creature. The lantern impacted on its back, shattering and spreading burning oil. It ignited the fuel Felix had already dowsed the creature in.
The troll screamed shrilly. It reeled back. Now, when Gotrek's axe fell, the wounds did not heal. The dwarf drove the blazing troll back to the pile of gold. It stumbled and fell.
Gotrek raised his axe. "In the name of my ancestors," said the trollslayer. "Die!"
His axe came down like a thunderbolt, severing the creature's daemonic head. The troll died.
Gingerly Gotrek picked up the warpstone amulet with the broken shard of Felix's sword. Holding the thing at arm's length, he took it outside to throw into the abyss.
Felix sat, drained of all emotion, on top of one of the dwarfish sarcophagi. Once more it comes to this, he thought, sitting among ruin and corpses after terrible conflict.
He heard Gotrek's running footsteps coming closer. Panting, the dwarf entered the chamber.
"The gobbos come, manling," he said.
"How many?" Felix asked.
Gotrek shook his head tiredly. "Too many. At least I have disposed of that tainted thing. I can die happy here amid the tombs of my ancestors."

Felix went over and picked up the dragon-hilted sword. "I would have liked to have returned this to Aldred's people," he said. "It would give some meaning to all this death."

Gotrek shrugged. He glanced to the door. The archway was filled with green-skinned marauders, advancing behind their grinning moon banners. Felix slid the Sigmarian sword smoothly from its sheath. A thrilling musical note sang out. The runes along its blade blazed brightly. For a second the goblins hesitated.

Gotrek looked over at Felix and grinned, revealing his missing teeth. "This is going to be a truly heroic death, manling. My only regret is that no-one will ever hear of it."

Felix looked back at the oncoming horde, positioned himself so that his back was to a sarcophagus. "You don't know how sorry I am about that," he said grimly, making a few trial swipes with the blade. It felt good, light and well-balanced, as if made for his hand. He was surprised to find he was no longer afraid. He had gone beyond fear.

The standard bearer halted and turned to harangue his troops. None of them seemed to be anxious to be the first to meet the Trollslayer's axe or the glowing runesword.

"Get on with it!" bellowed Gotrek. "My axe thirsts."

The goblins roared. The leader turned and gestured for them to advance. They surged forwards as irresistibly as the tide. This is it, thought Felix, steeling himself, preparing to lash out, to take as many foes as he could into death with him.

"Goodbye, Gotrek," he said and stopped. The goblins had halted and stood, looking panic-stricken. What's going on? Felix wondered. Cold green light streamed over his shoulders. He looked back and saw ranks of regal dwarfish spirits. They seemed fierce and terrible.

The standard bearer tried to rally his troops but the ghostly dwarfs reached him and touched his heart. His face drained of colour, and he fell, clutching his breast. The spirits surged into the goblins. Spectral axes flickered. Greenskin warriors fell, no mark upon their bodies. A hideous keening filled the air, a thin reedy imitation of dwarven war-cries. The remaining tribesmen turned and fled. The ghostly warriors pursued.

Felix and Gotrek stood in the empty vault, surrounded by the towering sarcophagi. Slowly the air in front of them coalesced. Tendrils of greenish

light drifted back through the entrance, took dwarfish shape. The spirits looked different. The ghost who had spoken to Gotrek earlier stood there. She looked different, as if a terrible burden had been lifted from her. She looked at Gotrek.

"The ancient enemies are gone. We could not leave them to despoil our tombs now that you have cleansed them. We are in your debt."

"You have robbed me of a mighty death," said Gotrek sourly.

"It was not your destiny to fall here this day. Your doom is far greater and its time is approaching."

Gotrek looked quizzically at the ancient queen.

"I may say no more. Farewell, Gotrek, son of Gurni. We wish you well. You shall be remembered."

The ghosts seemed to coalesce into one cold green flame that glowed like a star in the darkness. The light changed from green to warm gold and then became brighter than the sun. Felix averted his eyes and still was dazzled. When his sight returned he looked upon the tombs. The place was empty except for himself and Gotrek. The dwarf frowned thoughtfully. For a moment a strange expression gleamed in his one good eye, then he turned and looked upon the treasure.

Felix could almost read his mind. He was considering taking the wealth, desecrating the tomb himself. Felix held his breath. After long minutes, Gotrek shrugged.

"What about the others? Shouldn't we lay them to rest?" asked Felix.

"Leave them," said Gotrek. "They lie among the mighty. Their bodies are safe."

They went through the arch, and Gotrek touched the runes according to the ancient pattern. The tomb was sealed. Then they made their way up through the old darkness towards the light of day.

THE SPELLS BELOW

by Neil Jones

Katarina Kraeber strolled through the streets of Waldenhof. Early morning sunlight slanted in over the close-crowded rooftops; the air was full of the

smell of freshly baked bread. Around her, townsfolk were already going about their business, calling out the occasional greeting to one another. Katarina felt relaxed and happy: she was on her way to her lessons in wizardry.

Above her, mounted on a high gable, she saw a gilded weathervane clearly outlined against the blue summer sky. The spells that Anton Freiwald - and her father before him - had taught her came whispering into her mind.

A glance up and down the street showed her that no-one was looking in her direction. Lifting one slim hand, her brown eyes intent on the weathervane, she began to murmur the words of a spell.

Very slowly, the weathervane began to turn, moving counter to the breeze that was stirring the morning air. It completed one full turn, and then began to pick up speed, creaking as it did so.

A plump merchant stopped directly across the street from Katarina. He looked upwards, frowning, then peered suspiciously at Katarina. Her blue tunic, hose and cap clearly marked her out as an apprentice of the Wizard's Guild.

Katarina broke the spell at once and continued on down the street, her easy mood gone, replaced now by a sense of unease. Wizardry was legal in Waldenhof but both Anton and her father had warned her about the need to be circumspect. Ordinary folk feared magic, often with good reason.

As she hurried on through the streets, she sensed that the mood of the townsfolk around her had begun to change, too. Some of them were exchanging words and glances, as if there were something going on that she was not aware of.

She turned the corner into Ostgardstrasse and, looking down it to where it opened onto the expanse of Sigmarplatz, she saw the steel helms of soldiers. A feeling of alarm went through her as sharp and as sudden as a knife-blade.

She pushed her way through the crowd that was beginning to gather and found herself behind two burly soldiers. Beyond them, there were hundreds more already in the square. Sunlight glittered off their weapons and armour. The banner of Waldenhof's Graf, Jurgen von Stolzing, fluttered in the breeze.

The soldiers were drawn up into an arc that went around three sides of the square and stretched into Zoffstrasse on her left and Merzbahn on her right.

The row of elegant four-storey mansions directly opposite her was surrounded. And in the centre of that row, its red-lacquered door and shuttered windows gleaming against grey stone, was the residence of Anton Freiwald.

Anton, Katarina thought, remembering. When her father had died in debt and there had been no-one she could turn to, it had been Anton who had come to offer her his help. Recognizing her talent, he had made her his apprentice. And then later, when her respect and gratitude had been joined by other, stronger feelings - of attraction, affection - they had become lovers.

Now Anton was the one in trouble and it was her turn to help him.

Taking a chance that everyone's attention would be focused on the square, Katarina cast a simple garrulity-spell upon the two soldiers immediately in front of her. One promptly leaned towards the other and muttered: "Remember, the Graf said to take him alive. There's a reward in it for us if we do."

"It's secrets they're after," the second man whispered back. "Dark magic secrets. They want to put him to the question. But it's a waste of time. Everyone knows you can't torture anything out of a dark magician."

"What's it matter so long as we get paid?"

The squat bulk of a siege engine came into view, rumbling slowly forward across the cobbles. Following behind it were people that she recognized - all members of the Wizard's Guild. With alarm, she saw that there were dozens of them, wizards of every level, from all of the various colleges. Hastily, Katarina allowed her spell to fade, hoping it had not been detected.

As the wizards gathered together in the square immediately in front of her, a brazier was set up beside the siege engine. Strange odours began to rise from it, spicing the morning air.

The house seemed a hundred miles away but she knew she had to get across Sigmarplatz to it and quickly. Her only chance was to slip past the soldiers and then make a run for it. The thought of it terrified her - but there was no alternative, not if she was going to help Anton. And she would have to do it now, before the Graf began his assault.

She took a slow, deep breath. Then another, searching for calm. She took a step forward - and a hand closed on her arm.
"Now," a cold voice said, "what sort of wizardling have we here?"
Held by an iron-hard grip, she looked up into a dark-bearded face she recognized: Gerhard Lehner, Magister of the Wizards' Guild - and Anton Freiwald's bitterest rival.
Two soldiers moved in to take hold of her arms. They marched her forward and a moment later she was standing before a tall, richly dressed figure: Graf Jurgen von Stolzing himself.
"What's going on?" he demanded, his gaze moving from Lehner to Katarina.
"A little surreptious spell-casting, my lord Graf," replied Lehner. He raised his hand in a deprecatory gesture. "Fortunately, very little indeed."
The Graf stared at Katarina, suspicion gleaming in his pale blue eyes. "Who are you?"

"Allow me to introduce you," said Lehner. He reached out to knock Katarina's blue apprentice's cap to the ground. Her hair shook free. "This is fraulein Katarina Kraeber, *apprentice*"-he lingered faintly over the word - "to Anton Freiwald."

The Graf inspected her coldly, took in the brown hair, cut neatly at the jawline, the high-cheekboned face, the green eyes. "So," he said. "Another acolyte of Chaos?"
"Quite likely, Graf," replied Lehner.
Chaos. The full extent of the charges against Anton came home to her. No wonder they had come for him with such overwhelming force.
Then her name finally registered with the Graf. "Kraeber?"
"Yes, my lord. Her late father was Joachim Kraeber, of my own guild. Her grandfather - "
"Yes, yes," said the Graf. "I remember the family."
"They gave you loyal service my lord," said Katarina, seizing her chance to speak. "As I - "
"What were you trying to do?" demanded the Graf, his thin face drawn into tight lines. "Tell me, or you'll be made to."

Katarina's eyes went to the mansion, impossibly distant across the square. "My duty. Only that."
"Your duty? As a citizen of Waldenhof - or as a servant of the dark magician, Anton Freiwald?"
"My lord," protested Katarina, "don't believe Magister Lehner. He's jealous of Anton's talent, his spells, his - "
"Spells?" said the Graf sharply. "What do you know of them?"
Immediately, Katarina became guarded; Anton had warned her to say nothing of his research. "Only the ones he has taught me," she answered after a moment. "Those proper to an apprentice."
"I think she knows much more than she's telling us, my lord," put in Lehner. "Best she be put to the question."
"Yes," agreed the Graf. "Alongside her master." He swung around to face the house. "It's time we flushed that Chaos devil out." He gestured to Lehner. "Begin."
Lehner stepped confidently forward until he was standing before the brazier. He lifted both arms into the air, his lips began to move - and then a voice was booming out over the cobbled expanse of the square. A human voice, the voice of Gerhard Lehner, but magically amplified. It echoed across the tiled roofs around them, out across the whole city of Waldenhof. "Anton Freiwald. You are charged with practicing dark magic. Surrender! In the name of Jurgen von Stolzing, Graf of Waldenhof."
An expectant hush fell over the crowd. Moments passed. There was no response from the house. The Graf looked towards the siege engine, and brought his hand down in a decisive gesture. The command to fire rang out across the square. Wood and leather creaked, and then a massive stone was whistling through the air.
The stone arced across the square, towards the house. Abruptly, there was a sound like water being poured onto white-hot coals - and rainbow light exploded around it.
A massed gasp of astonishment went up from everyone in the square, hands were raised against the glare. The light began to dim and the stone became visible once again. It was absolutely still, hanging suspended in mid-air.
For a few seconds longer it remained there. Then it dropped to the ground and shattered against the cobbles. The shield, Katarina thought with sudden

hope. The shield of spell-power that Anton had talked of. Somehow he had managed to get it operating in time.
"Gerhard," said the Graf in a hushed voice. "Have we come too late?"
"Perhaps, my lord," replied Lehner in a whisper. He looked shaken. "Or perhaps only just in time."
The grip on Katarina's arms had slackened. The two soldiers who held her had given all their attention to the stone, and were still staring at the shards scattered across the cobbles.
With a sudden effort, Katarina wrenched herself free of them. As she ran forward, hands grabbed at her. She struck out at them, dodged from side to side.
Then she was out onto the open square, running towards the house.
From behind there were shouts to halt. She ignored them. An arrow flew past her on the left. It sparked against the invisible wall across the square and fell to the ground, all its energy spent.
Katarina ran on, calling out the words of a warding-spell, praying that she had remembered it correctly. Then the air around her was bristling with arrows. Her boots thudded on the cobbles. Sigmarplatz had never seemed so vast.
She sensed magic stirring behind her, knew that Lehner and the others were spell-casting at her back. Then rainbow light was shimmering around her. She had reached the safety of the shield.
Her movements slowed; it felt as if she were moving underwater. Safe now, she told herself. Almost home. All you have to do is keep moving. She could feel Anton's magic flowing through her, protecting her.
Then her eyes snapped shut as the light around her brightened to a blinding intensity. It sounded as if a host of daemons were screeching at her. She tried to put her hands to her ears but they moved with dreamlike slowness.
Something had struck the shield. Not a rock this time - something magical, she realized. A spell. Lehner and the rest of the Guild. All those wizards - of every level - acting together. Creating a combined spell of tremendous force, designed to tear the shield apart.
Magical energy surged through her body as the two spells - shield-wall and shield-breaker - clashed. Too much raw magic, coming at her much too quickly. Anton could have weathered it easily, she knew. But despite his

coaching, she was still so very inexperienced, barely out of the apprentice stage.

For a moment, she stood there, twitching like a fly freshly caught in a spiderweb, her feet rooted to the ground. Then she remembered Anton's strength-spell, brought his voice into her mind, heard him reciting it to her once again.

She took a single step forward - and stepped fully into the sanctuary of the shield. As she stumbled across the remaining distance, she looked back over her shoulder. Light licked at the shield: gold, blue, crimson, jade. But the shield was holding.

The red-lacquered door opened and two men wearing leather and chain mail darted out: Anton's hired Kislevan guards. As they pulled her roughly inside, she saw the other three Kislevans waiting in the hallway, their braided yellow hair hanging down across their shoulders. They had their weapons drawn. Katarina was surprised that they had all remained loyal.

The door to Anton's study opened and then the wizard was standing in front of her. His dark hair hung loose to his shoulders, framing his broad, surprisingly youthful face. He was wearing an elaborately decorated robe; inscribed upon the chest was his personal symbol, based on the Great Wheel of magic itself. Each of its eight spokes was a different colour, representing the eight colours of the magical flux. The wheel's rim was comprised of bands of the same colours, each in their proper station.

"Katarina," the wizard called out angrily. "What in Taal's name did you think you were doing?"

Still trying to catch her breath, she said, "I came to warn you, Anton. You can't surrender. They mean to torture you."

"I already knew that," he said, but his voice had softened.

A diminutive figure, even smaller than a Halfling, appeared behind Anton, one bony hand clutching at the wizard's robe: Anton's familiar. Despite its physical approximation to humanity, the look of its pale coarse-grained flesh gave it a rough, unfinished appearance. It glared up at Katarina with its red-rimmed eyes, its lips parting in a snarl.

Katarina looked quickly away from the creature, feeling the instinctive revulsion she had never been able to rid herself of.

"Anton," she said. "They think you've turned to Chaos."

"What?" he responded, clearly astonished. "They think that - and still they want to steal my knowledge?"
The captain of the Kislevans called to them. Peering through the shutters, they could see that the Grafs troops had begun to move out across the square, were advancing on the house. Spell-light sheened their weapons.
"Will the shield stop them?" asked Katarina.
"Not for long. Not with the whole of the Guild out there to help them. But it should slow them down."
Katarina shuddered, remembering her own struggle to pass through it.
Anton was looking around at his handful of mercenaries. "Men," he called out, his voice vibrant. "The Graf is sending his soldiers against me. But I can stop them. All I need is a little time to charge my spell to its fullest strength."
"You can stop them?" echoed Katarina in wonder.
"Yes," Anton said levelly, his eyes on the mercenaries. "But I will need time."
"My lord," the Kislevan captain protested, in heavily-accented Reikspiel, "there are hundreds of them."
"When they try to pass through the shield they'll be vulnerable," said Anton.
The man's seamed face was full of doubt. "We'll try, of course, but - "
Anton raised his hands, murmured something Katarina could not catch. The air around his fingertips quivered with the force of his spell. The mercenaries straightened, as if sudden new resolve had come into them.
"My lord," the captain said. "We'll hold them." His eyes were shining.
A loyalty-spell, Katarina realized. Anton had placed a loyalty-spell upon his Kislevans and now he had raised its strength to the limit. That Anton had used such a spell disturbed her. It seemed - *wrong*. But then she recalled the forces arrayed against him and knew that he had simply had no choice.
Anton turned away, went down the hall to an oaken door, and slid a key into the lock. The door opened soundlessly, revealing a stone stairway that spiralled downwards into darkness. It led to the lowest level of the house, the level that held Anton's laboratory.
"Let me come with you," Katarina called out. "Perhaps I can help." In all the time she had known him he had never allowed her - or anyone else - to

enter his laboratory.
Anton stared at her, as if he were trying to reach some sort of decision. The familiar gave an impatient tug at his robe, staring balefully at Katarina. "No," the wizard said finally. "It's best you stay here."
When she started to protest, he lifted her hand to his lips, kissed it briefly. "This once, Katarina, obey me."
She touched the back of her other hand to his shaven cheek; the slight roughness - and the sharp male scent of him - felt reassuring. "Of course. Good luck."
A glowing ball of light rose from his hand and preceded him down the stairway. The familiar scuttled after him. The door swung shut behind them and the lock snicked into place.
There was a noise from above, as if one of the shutters in one of the upstairs rooms had opened. Katarina looked up to see a shadow detach itself from a darkened side-door on the landing. It glided soundlessly towards the balustrade, a movement that was so swift and silent that it was as if the shadow was drifting through her mind rather than the house, as if she was dreaming its brief prescence.
Instinctively, she turned to block the door Anton had taken.
The shadow-shape leapt from the balustrade and landed lightly in front of her. It stood there for a moment, regarding her; a tall muscular man-shape, clothed in black, eyes gleaming at her out of a dark mask. And on one sleeve the scorpion symbol of Khaine, god of murder.
An assassin. If Anton Freiwald could not be taken alive then the Graf wanted to be very sure of his death.
On the man's waist Katarina saw an amulet that bore the Guild's insignia. To one with her training, it practically writhed with spell-charge. Already it had brought the assassin this far - through the shield and past Anton's other warding spells. If enough of the wizards had poured enough of their power into it - then perhaps it might be strong enough to take him safely down to the laboratory itself.
"Stand aside," the assassin said. "My contract is for your master's life, not yours."
"You mean Anton Freiwald, the wizard?" Katarina said quickly. "But he's outside. With the guards."

The assassin's eyes shifted to the side for a fraction of a second and, taking her chance, Katarina sprang at him, both hands clenched, aiming low.
The assassin twisted easily aside and, tripping Katarina as she went past him, sent her toppling to the floor. Shaken but unhurt, Katarina got quickly back to her feet but the assassin was gone - and the door to the lower level hung open.
She shouted down into the spiral stairway, but her voice was lost in the gloom. She tried again, calling out as loudly as she could, but again the darkness absorbed her words, like a sponge soaking up drops of water.
There was no torch to light her way and she was afraid. Afraid of the spells that guarded the place, afraid of what was down there. But Anton Freiwald - her protector, her lover - was in danger. She stepped forward.
With her foot poised above the first step, she heard a voice - Anton's. "Back," the voice said sternly. "This level is forbidden to all."
For a moment, she thought he was coming back up the stairs. But then she realized it was merely the taboo-spell speaking in her mind. The first of Anton's barriers. She could feel its magical pressure in her head.
"Anton, I'm trying to help you," she protested. She tried to move her foot. But the muscles in her legs had locked. No matter how hard she tried, they wouldn't move.
Katarina strained again and again to take that first step, to break through the spell, but it was as if the lower half of her body was paralyzed. The harder she tried, the louder the voice in her head became, commanding, threatening, until it was a shout echoing inside her skull. She lifted her hands to her ears, trying to shut it out. It rose in volume, became a thunderous roar, blotting out thought.
Swaying on her feet, eyes tightly closed, she summoned her own image of Anton. The lean, muscular body; the grey eyes, the long silken hair. His lips were on hers, his arms around her. She could feel the warmth of him against her.
The love she felt for him was as bright and sharp in her mind as a knife-blade. It brought her the strength she needed to break through the spell, the strength to disobey him.
The cold chilled through the sole of her boot as she placed it on the first step. The wizard's voice dropped, until it was only a shout once again. Then, a second step, a third. All she could hear now was a shrill whisper.

She continued downwards. As she passed the first turn in the stairs, the voice faded completely.

Below her, the darkness stirred. From out of it, a small questing head appeared, attached to a long serpentine neck. Its teeth were bared and its yellow eyes glowed like tiny amber coals. The head regarded her for a moment. Then it began moving steadily up towards her.

Katarina halted, but did not retreat. The stairs were the only way down to Anton's laboratory. She had to get past this creature. She knew what it was; Anton had talked to her of his defences. It was not a living creature, but a reflection of her own inner fears, given shape - but not substance - by Anton's spell. It could kill her, but only through terror of her own making.

Knowing what it was, she told herself firmly, would be enough. She could pass it. Shutting her eyes, she put her foot onto the next step.

There was a hiss of rage and the scrabbling of claws on stone. An acrid stench drifted up to her nostrils. The sound of laboured breathing was amplified by the narrowness of the stairway.

Down the stairs she went, not stopping, knowing that if she did she was lost, feeling her way, her hands on the cold, clammy stone. At any moment she kept expecting to feel that small mouth on her body. But the creature was only her own fear given form. She held that knowledge in her mind like a talisman as she descended.

The air grew chill. She had lost count of the turns now. Her feet and hands were becoming numb from cold. The stairway seemed to go on forever.

Abruptly, one foot jarred on stone that was well above where the next step should have been. She stepped forward, knowing she had reached the bottom.

There was a scraping sound and something brushed against her leg. Then she felt a sudden sharp pain as teeth closed on her ankle. Her heart seemed to stop and her eyes came open.

A little light seeped down the stairway behind her, enough to dimly illuminate the narrow corridor that led to the single door: the entrance to Anton's laboratory. She saw the mind-monster staring at her. But it was far away at the end of the long corridor, coiled in front of the door. Its outline had lost definition, and the colour had leached out of its yellow eyes. As she watched, it finally faded out altogether, blending back into the darkness it had come from.

Katarina's mouth was dust-dry. Her breathing was coming in short, shallow gasps. That bite had felt so real that her ankle still throbbed. Looking down, she saw something small and pallid moving at her feet; its eyes glittered in the dim light.

The familiar. She kicked at the creature and it scuttled away on hands and feet, finally halting at the far end of the corridor, beyond the door to the laboratory, well out of her reach.

In the gloom it was barely visible, but the faint reflections from its eyes told her that it was staring back at her. Faintly, in the quiet, she could hear its breathing.

Drops of blood smeared her hand as she bent and massaged her ankle. The creature repelled her. Even the thought of its touch filled her with disgust. It was an homunculus, created by Anton in his laboratory to serve as his familiar. Despite its vaguely human form, it was little more intelligent than an animal. It must have attacked her simply because she had descended to this forbidden level. Normally it never left its master's side. Had it been driven outside the laboratory when the assassin attacked?

Moving cautiously, trying to keep one eye on the door and the other on the familiar, Katarina made her way down the corridor.

Additional light seeped out from around the door frame - but the room beyond the thick wooden door seemed silent. All Katarina could hear was her own laboured breathing and an occasional muted sound from the familiar.

The stillness was shattered abruptly: a scream rang out, coming from within the laboratory. Katarina stood there, held rigid by the sound. It was the wizard's voice. And full of such rage and pain.

Images of Anton injured - even dead or dying - filled her mind. For an instant longer, she remained motionless. Then, as the scream ended, she sprang to the door. Anton might be fighting for his life. She had to get inside.

She put one hand on the massive bronze door knob; it was icy cold to the touch. She tried to turn it, first one way and then the other. It would not move. And the knob felt as if it were slightly warmer now, almost the same temperature as her body.

Using both hands this time, she tried again. Still the knob would not turn. Katarina could sense that it was resisting her pressure and its temperature

was definitely increasing now: already it was unpleasantly hot. Her palms and fingers were beginning to hurt.
Calling out the words of an open-spell, she exerted all her strength. Still the knob was immovable. The heat rose, the pain in her hands was much greater now, it felt as if the skin were burning. Somehow she forced herself to hold on to the knob, straining to turn it, knowing that the only important thing was to get inside the laboratory, to help Anton.
The pain continued to worsen. But when she looked down at her hands, half expecting to see the skin burnt, and saw to her astonishment that they were unmarked, she knew.
Once again, she brought Anton's image back into her mind and held it there. The pain wasn't real, she told herself. Only the door was real.
Anton's spell held for a moment longer, then the knob gave an almost human groan and slowly, reluctantly, the door swung open.
The room beyond gleamed with light. A ring of skulls was revolving slowly in the centre of the chamber. Each one floated in the air, suspended only by magic, its jaws opening and closing at intervals as if chanting a spell, but no sound emerged. The eye sockets were giving out a soft, bone-white radiance.
Katarina stared at the turning skulls for a moment, both horrified and fascinated. As they slowly swung past her, she found herself counting them: there were five.
Once Anton had spoken to her of the source of his great magic - he had talked of a mechanism, a reservoir - that allowed him to accumulate magical energy, to use whenever he needed. Was this grisly assemblage of skulls Anton's secret? Could this be what powered his spells?
Chaos magic? No, she decided. Not Anton Freiwald. He was of the Rainbow College and was willing to use any and all of the colours of the magical spectrum. But not the undivided black of Chaos.
Then the memory of the scream finally returned to her and she called out, "Anton?"
There was no answer. Neither the wizard nor the assassin was in sight. Nothing moved except the skulls. The whole room was silent. The shifting light from the eye-sockets reflected off the contents of jars and vials that lined the left-hand wall, producing shafts of rainbow light. A faint sulphurous odour hung in the air.

Across the room from her, half hidden behind a curtain, a door stood ajar. Beyond, she could see cold stone. A tunnel, leading out of the chamber, perhaps to the city above. Had Anton taken it, perhaps pursued by the assassin?

She stepped forward and almost immediately she saw a face. It was staring towards her from the opposite side of the room. Again, she called out. She recognized the features now; they were Anton's. But another step closer and she realized it was only a portrait of the wizard hanging on the far wall.

Then, further to her right, half-hidden by shadow, she saw a dark shape sprawled in front of a wall lined with bookshelves. A human shape.

Katarina took a step towards the body. Anton? No, it was a man, but dressed completely in black: The assassin.

His eyes stared up at her through a fine grey mesh that covered his face. The lines were drawn so tightly that they had cut into the skin beneath. The man's hands were clutching at the mesh in what must have been a last desperate attempt to rip it off.

When she heard the noise behind her she whirled around but it was only the familiar. It stood in the doorway for a moment, sniffing the air, its eyes searching. Then it ran forward on its thin legs and disappeared behind the large oaken desk on the other side of the room.

Katarina approached cautiously and peered over the desk at the creature. The familiar was squatting on a body. Anton's body. Katarina knew the face immediately, even though the features were contorted by rage and pain. He was dead; a slim black-hilted dagger was buried in his heart. His robe and the brocaded carpet beneath it were soaked in blood.

But Katarina's grief was buried by disgust for what the familiar was doing. The creature was bent over the body, its thin hands clutching at Anton's tunic, its tiny mouth at the wizard's throat.

Filled with loathing, Katarina reached for something - anything - to throw at it. As her fingers closed on a flask that stood on the wizard's desk, the familiar raised its head, flicked a glance at her, and bared its teeth in a snarl. Its lips were smeared with blood.

She hurled the flask with all her strength, and it struck the familiar on the side of its head. The creature toppled off Anton's body to sprawl, limp and bleeding, beside its master.

Breathing hard, tears streaming down her face, Katarina stared down at Anton then, and waited for her grief to overwhelm her. Nothing mattered any more. He was dead. How could she go on living without him?

The feeling that finally came was a ghost of the grief she had expected. Its lack of intensity astonished her. Anton Freiwald, the man she loved, the man who had meant more than her own life to her, was dead. Why did she only feel - regret?

Shocked, she turned to her memories, in search of something that would inspire some deeper feeling. Trying to remember the gratitude she had felt for him, the respect, the loyalty, the love.

Memories came, but they were blurred, wavering, as if reflected off moving water. Her father's death, the debts she could not pay. And then Anton offering her his protection. Gratitude. She knew she should feel gratitude. And yet...

As she struggled to make everything come clear, something broke in her mind - rainbow light shimmered in the corners of her vision for a second and then was gone.

A spell, she realized. Someone had used a spell on her. Someone? - Anton. He had clamped a magic shackle around her mind.

Her memories came into focus - to be seen from a stark new perspective. Her talent for magic was great, as her father had told her often enough. Anton had seen an opportunity to harness that talent for himself. He had come to her when she was vulnerable and put the shackle in place. All the lessons with him, the magic he had taught her, had been simply so that he might use her more effectively.

Feelings burst up from deep within her and churned through her mind. There was rage and hate and bitterness - and a sense of violation.

She had been his slave. Only that. Love him? How could she ever have believed that she had loved him? What she had felt in his arms had been a forgery. The memory of his hands on her body brought the taste of bile to her mouth.

"All the gods damn you, Anton!" she cried out. Her hands clenched, she stood above Anton Freiwald's body, not touching it - unwilling to - but wanting to strike it, to hurt the wizard as he had hurt her. Tears slid down her cheeks. She almost wanted him to live again so that she could kill him, and this time watch him die. Almost.

Then, a new thought came: Free. She was free. Her mind was her own again, her body hers and hers alone. A feeling of joy went through her, grew until it was almost dizzying in its intensity. Free, she told herself again. And she was going to stay that way.

A glance at the ring of skulls and her new exhilaration faded. It was slowing, its light fading. Anton was dead, and his spells were dying with him. When the skulls stopped completely, the spell-shield above would fail - and Gerhard Lehner would lead the Grafs soldiers down to the laboratory. All she could expect from them was torture and - eventually - death.

Swinging around, she found the tunnel that led away into darkness. The air that wafted out of it was dank and icy cold. It looked very old - perhaps it had been carved by Dwarven engineers in the days of Waldenhof's founding.

Anton had never intended to fight, Katarina knew then, only to escape. This tunnel was his secret escape route. Now it would be hers.

She started towards the tunnel - and then halted. Anton had told her of his grimoire, a listing of all the spells he had mastered, from every branch of the art, and drawing upon all the magic colours. It was somewhere here, Katarina was sure. If she could find it and take it with her, then she could continue her studies and - slowly, patiently - master the spells Anton had never intended to teach her.

The bookshelves that lined the right-hand wall from top to bottom and wall to wall caught her eye. Once she would have been fascinated by the wealth of knowledge the wizard had accumulated here, could have spent hours raptly studying them. Now she thought only of the grimoire. Books tumbled to the floor as she hunted for it. The grimoire was not among them.

The drawers of the desk came open easily. Inside were papers bearing magical signs and script in Anton's precise hand. But again no sign of the grimoire.

The skulls were barely moving now, their light a dim glow. At any moment they would stop completely. Anton had hidden the grimoire too well. Perhaps she should run while she still had the chance.

No. She had suffered too much. It had to be somewhere down here and she would find it. Then her eyes chanced to return to the portrait on the wall and she felt a sudden sharp certainty.

"Come no further!" a voice called out as she took a step towards it.

The voice froze her, her fear returning in a sudden rush. She wanted to turn, to look at the wizard's dead body. But her eyes were still on the portrait. Its thin lips were moving, its dark eyes flashing. "Come no closer, intruder. Or you die."

The words were coming from the portrait. Another spell. But the face was expressionless, the voice flat, as if the effort of animation was now too great for it.

"All the gods damn you, wizard," she said, hating him, and reached for the portrait.

Dust rose from the thick, patterned carpet to sting her face and arms. She screwed her eyes shut and brushed at it furiously. Something drifted down onto her head and shoulders from the ceiling. Her eyes flicked open again. A spider's web. It settled on her and began to tighten. She put both hands up to it to pull it away. Its silken strands had the strength of steel. They tightened further, biting into her flesh. She couldn't breathe!

An image of the assassin's masked face came into her mind, the mesh that had killed him tight around it. Choking, she pulled again at the web, this time in desperation. One of its strands parted, with a sharp *twang*. Then, one by one, others followed. Katarina sucked in air through her mouth and, a moment later, she ripped the thing from her face and flung it onto the carpet. It writhed there for a time, like some dying grey insect, the dust drifting back down to the ground around it.

Katarina massaged her face and neck for a moment, knowing that if Anton's power had not almost completely drained from his spell, if only a little more of his strength had remained in it, she would be dead now.

Stepping up to the portrait, she took it carefully in both hands. "Beware..." the wizard's voice intoned as she lifted it away from the wall. Behind it was a small round hatch, bearing Anton's rainbow wheel symbol.

"Intruder," the portrait was droning at her. She smashed it against the wall, heard the frame splinter, the canvas rip. She broke off a piece of the frame, letting the rest drop onto the floor, and began trying to prize the hatch open. At the same time, she called out spell-words, commanding it to unseal.

When it wouldn't move, she beat at it with the wood, hitting it again and again, as hard as she could, imagining it was Anton she was striking.
Abruptly, the hatch flew open with the same groan of despair that the door to the laboratory had made. Inside, an arm's length away, was a book. It was bound in leather and embossed with the rainbow-wheel: the grimoire.
Transferring the piece of the frame to her left hand, she reached into the vault with her right. Her fingers found the book.
The vault grew teeth along its rim, then closed on her arm with a snap. She screamed. As the vault gnashed at her, her vision blurred and she felt as if she would pass out from the pain. A shard of canvas was whispering from the carpet, "Beware. Come no further."
She beat at the vault with the bar of wood in her hand, then stabbed at it with the splintered end. Finally, when she felt as if she had no more strength left, the vault opened fractionally and, with an agonized cry, she managed to wrench her arm free.
As she stared at the blood, expecting to find her limb half-severed, she saw with surprise that the cuts the teeth had made were only superficial. Then that spell, too, had been almost exhausted.
But, most of all, she was amazed to find that in her hand she held the grimoire of Anton Freiwald.
The book was hers, and so was its knowledge. Nothing would stop her now. Laughing, feeling much as she did when Anton had made her drink too much wine, she clutched the grimoire to her as if she had already mastered its many secrets, had already become a wizard of the highest level.
The canvas fragment on the carpet whispered: "Beware." Again she laughed, but her eyes moved to the ring of skulls.
Stories had been whispered of Anton Freiwald in the taverns and the market-place, stories she had shut her mind to. Now they came back to her. Stories of him moving from city to city across the Old World, through the years. How many cities? How many years? And - darker rumours of a death in each of those places: Anton's death.
The skulls swung around in their stately decaying orbit, their jaws moving in unison, as if they were telling her the answers to her questions in a language she could not understand. The skulls - there were five of them.
As Katarina watched, the ring of skulls began to spin faster and faster, its light brightening. A silken shivering went up and down her spine. Slowly,

drawn by a fear that she could not have put a name to, her eyes dropped to Anton's body.
It was still lying in the same position, the knife buried in its chest. But it was shrivelled, fleshless. The skin was intact, but now it was only a parchment-thin covering hanging loosely over the wizard's bones, like the abandoned skin of a snake.
The familiar was gone from beside the body.
At that moment, a pale hand appeared from the other side of the oaken desk and clutched at its edge. It flexed there a moment, trying to secure its grip.
Then, a second hand followed. After a moment, a head came into view, and then the rest of the body was rising on the other side of the desk, swaying unsteadily. It was the familiar - Katarina knew it by the chalky complexion of the skin, the coarse features of the face - but its body was now man-size.
Its flesh was moving - rippling and twitching, as if still trying to settle itself into its new shape. The mouth opened but no sound came out. The grey eyes glistened, not quite focused.
As she stared at it, the face began to change, moulding itself into a new image. The lips thinned, the cheekbones came into prominence, eyebrows bristled into view.
Katarina took a step backwards, towards the tunnel, and her booted foot brushed against the husk of Anton's body. Bones scraped together, but she did not look down.
The creature's eyes were shifting, searching for the source of the noise. They slid past her, then swung back to focus on her.
"Katarina," the half-formed thing said, in a slow, slurred whisper. "What are you doing here?" The eyes regarded her with vague surprise at first. Then, as they moved to the book in her hand, understanding came into them, understanding and a cold anger. "So."
The creature reached out with one pale hand. "My grimoire. Give it to me."
Staring into those grey eyes, Katarina found herself starting to obey out of sheer force of habit. Then the hate for the wizard that she had discovered inside herself returned with almost sickening force. She shook her head. "No, Morr damn you."
The creature's jaw slid down in surprise. "My slave-spell. You've broken it!" The protean features shifted; the expression was unrecognizable. Then,

an almost affectionate malevolence came into its eyes: they were wholly Anton's now. "But it will only take me a moment to replace it."
The creature gestured at her. A nimbus of rainbow light left its fingertips and drifted through the air towards her. Her eyes followed it, hypnotized, unable to pull away. The light blossomed as it neared her, its colours opening out like the petals of some iridescent flower: gold, jade, blue, grey, amethyst, crimson, amber, white. The eight colours of magic.
They splashed onto her eyeballs, soaked softly through them and into her mind. They shimmered and sparkled there, and then began to crystallize into a familiar pattern: an eight-spoked wheel.
"No!" She remembered it now, had lived with it inside her head. "Not again!"
Her reaction was instinctive. As the wheel began to spin within her, to grip her mind in its familiar embrace, she visualized her hands clenched inside her own mind, and hit out at it with all her strength.
The colours pulsed.
Sigmar give me strength, she thought, and struck again. This time a crack appeared. Another blow. More cracks. She hit the wheel again and again, until there was a webwork of fractures patterning the rainbow form. She smashed at it a final time, imagining the hammer of Sigmar in her hands. The wheel shattered into a thousand pieces.
"Katarina!" the creature said in surprise. "My little Katarina. But so strong now. It's hard to believe. To break my slave-spell a second time." The voice dropped. "That's dangerous."
It stumbled forward, its movements still not fully coordinated. Before she could draw back, it reached out with surprising speed and grasped her right wrist.
The contact sent a wave of disgust through her body; its skin was clammy, the smell that came off it not quite human. She tried to wrench her arm free, but the grip was too strong.
With its free hand it reached out for the spell-book. Half-turning, she flung the book behind her. The creature made a barely articulate cry of rage, and struck her in the face. Then, wrapping its free arm around her, it used its strength and weight to force her to the ground. As she went down onto the carpet, she felt her head bump against the wizard's skin-draped skeleton.

The man-thing put its rubbery lips to her ear. "Pain, Katarina," it commanded. "Pain." The words sank into her mind as if they had been arrows. Her nerves were suddenly alight. Every part of her body had been put to the torch. She screamed.

"A sample, Katarina, of what I could teach you if only we had a little time to ourselves again." The voice in her ear was a hoarse murmur, unmistakably Anton's. "All the magic you could ever wish to learn about."

In desperation, the pain threatening to wipe out all rational thought, her eyes rolled upwards, towards the city above.

"No," the creature whispered as it shifted on top of her. "There's no help there. My Kislevans will fight on until they die."

It reached for something behind her, tugged at it, grunting with the effort, until it came free, then brought it forward so that she could see it. It was the skull from Anton's body.

The creature's head came back into her field of vision; its eyes were glossy. "Death." It shuddered. Then, slowly, its features contorted into a caricature of a smile. "The Graf and those Guild bumpkins thought that it would stop me. Instead, it has given me one more component to add to my ring of power."

The skull rose from the creature's hand, beginning to glow as it did so, and floated across the room towards the ghostly chandelier of skulls, its jaw already moving in the same soundless chant.

Through the agony that was burning its way through her body she heard the creature continue. "With six skulls I can charge it to a new level of strength, an order of magnitude greater than was possible before."

Surely, Katarina thought in desperation, this new addition would disturb the delicate balance of the structure. If it would only distract Anton, for as much as a second, then she might have a chance.

The skull joined the ring, the others shifting smoothly to make a place for it. At once the glow from the eye-sockets sharpened, and the jaws began to move with even greater vigour.

"Not Chaos, Katarina," the creature whispered. "That is a snare - the fool's road to destruction. No, my path is slower, spread across many lifetimes. My magic is merely a little darker-hued than most." It leaned closer again, whispered confidentially into her ear. "The skulls will come with me, of course. To a new city, a new life. I wish I could take you too, Katarina. But

- your talent makes that too dangerous. No, I'll have to kill you. But quickly. I promise you that. First, though - my grimoire."
The creature reached out for the book. As its attention left her, the pain diminished fractionally. Her right hand was trapped, still held in the creature's grasp. With her left, she fumbled for something - anything - to strike at it with.
Her fingers found the body behind her head and felt along the soft fabric of the wizard's robe; the outline of the skeleton stood out plainly beneath it. Then they touched something sharp-edged: the assassin's blade.
Her hand reached for the hilt. Too far. She stretched her arm as much as she could. Still could not grasp it.
As the creature's pale hand closed on the book, Katarina closed her eyes, murmured the words of a fetch-spell. The knife slid free with a scrape of steel against bone, rose into the air, spun slowly around. Then drifted towards her extended hand.
The creature had the grimoire now, was grunting in satisfaction.
Katarina's hand closed around the hilt. She brought the knife up above the man-thing on top of her and, jerking her right hand free with a sudden effort, clasped the knife in both hands.
As the creature swivelled its head back towards her, she brought the blade down with all her strength, driving it into the creature's back.
"No," the man-thing called out, furious, as the blade pierced it. Its eyes glittered, brimming with anger but empty of pain, as if the half-formed body still lacked the capacity to feel any. It swung the grimoire at her like a club, and its empty hand came around to fend off the knife. The lips moved again, chanting the pain-spell.
Katarina shut her mind to the pain. It was not real, she would not allow herself to feel it. Nothing was real to her but her rage and her hate. Those feelings - and the knife she held in her hand.
Katarina wrenched it free, raised it, brought it down again, sensing it sink into the body above her. Then another time, and another, repeating the cycle over and over, ignoring the pain burning at the edges of her personal universe, the hands clutching at her arms.
"No." Suddenly there was fear in the voice. And Katarina knew why: This time there was no homunculus prepared and waiting to take up the wizard's life. This time there would be no resurrection.

"Die, gods damn you! Die!" Again and again she struck, until she had lost count of the number of times she had driven the blade into the creature's body, until her hands were sticky with its blood. Its arms thrashed feebly; the mouth opened and closed,but no further sound came out.

Finally, long after the creature had stopped moving, Katarina pushed its body off her and got to her feet. The ring of skulls was slowing once again, its light dwindling. Breathing hard, her tunic ripped, and streaked with blood and dust, she stared down at the body on the floor.

It was quite dead. And this death, she thought with grim satisfaction, was the wizard's final one.

With the grimoire in one hand and the dagger in the other, Katarina Kraeber went into the tunnel that led upwards to freedom.

THE LIGHT OF TRANSFIGURATION

by Brian Craig

Of all the stories I know, said Orfeo, with an unaccustomed softness in his voice, the ones I love best are those set in the region where I lived as a child, which is the Loren Forest. I wish that all the tales which I could tell of Loren were as happy as my memories of it, but alas it is not so. You will know the forest by repute as the abode of the virtuous wood elves, and it was by those elves that I was found and raised when I was abandoned there, but the forest is vast and there are many others who have sought solace and shelter in its wilder parts, among them bad and dangerous men who have increased the burden of evil and suffering which lies upon the world we love.

Most of the men who live on the fringes of the forest are honest worshippers of Taal, and many of those who live closer to its heart still follow caring traditions of the old religion, but there are parts of the forest which are host to the worshippers of darker gods, and to those who make treaty with daemons. One such tainted area is to be found in the lower reaches of the steep mountains called the Vaults, which I was taught in my

youth to avoid. Because the wood elves do not teach without explanation, they told me all that the wisdom of lore and legend had to say about the place, and it is one tale from that legacy which I will tell you now. It is one of that sad multitude of tales which warn us to beware of the wiles of those daemons which are sent by wicked gods to seduce and torment us.

On one of the lesser crags of this region, near a town called Selindre, there once stood a fortified manse, which was a centre of forbidden worship until the king who was great-grandfather to our own beloved Charles appointed his favourite knight Lanval de Valancourt to lead a crusade against the daemon-kin.

All good Bretonnians have heard the story of that great adventure, and you will know already that Lanval's courage prevailed at last against the evil magic of the sorcerer Khemis Kezula - but the versions of the tale you have heard from other tellers undoubtedly ended with the moment of Lanval's victory, and with the implication that all has been well in Selindre's demesnes since it was achieved. Alas, it is a truth which we too often forget that the shadows of evil cast by dark magic often linger long after the destruction of the magicians themselves.

It was because he knew this that Lanval de Valancourt, having acquired the estates of Khemis Kezula by right of lawful conquest, caused the fortress to be razed to the ground and its stones scattered about the mountainsides by his men-at-arms. Lanval never set foot among the ruins again, and when the time came for him to die - which he did in his bed, as all heroes deserve to do, though few achieve it - he advised his son Guillaume to leave it alone also. Guillaume, being a wise man as well as a dutiful son, did as he was instructed.

Guillaume lived ten years less than his father, departing this life at the age of fifty-two, and was misfortunate enough to die far from home, while fighting a campaign for his liege-lord the king. In consequence of this, his own son and heir, Jehan de Valancourt, acquired the lands around Selindre without receiving any solemn warning in regard to his use of them.

All his knowledge of them, in fact, was drawn from the tales of his grandfather's glorious victory, which many story-tellers less scrupulous than myself had altered somewhat for the purposes of prettification and flattery.

Jehan so loved to bask in the reflected glory of his ancestor's heroic exploits that he took an early opportunity to visit Selindre, and was somewhat

surprised to discover that the people of the town were less than grateful for the privilege of receiving him. He was a young man still, and had not quite understood how happy men can be when their liege-lords live distantly and do not put them to the trouble of providing obligatory hospitality.

When Jehan proudly rode up the slope to Khemis Kezula's blasted fortress to inspect the scene of his grandfather's victory he was unlucky enough to be thrown from his horse. He fell awkwardly, splitting his head upon a square-edged stone. Though his skull was not broken the wound never healed, and for the remainder of his life Jehan was tormented by evil dreams and periodic bouts of madness, during which the ordinary light of day seemed to him to be eclipsed by a brighter and more colourful light whose constant changes made him dizzy with anxiety.

Jehan became convinced that the ruins of Khemis Kezula's citadel were accursed - though whether he was mad or sane at the moment when he was persuaded of it, none can tell. For this reason, he inserted a clause into his will which said that the hill on which the fallen fortress stood should be set aside from the demesnes of Selindre, and should not be handed down to his own eldest son, who was called Lanfranc. Instead, the hill was given to the Sisters of Shallya, the goddess of healing and mercy, in order that they should raise in that wild and tempestuous region a shrine of their own. By means of this device Jehan de Valancourt sought to employ the power of the best and kindest of the gods to erase the memory and the legacy of wicked Khemis Kezula, whose prayers had undoubtedly been offered to a very different deity.

The Sisters of Shallya were not entirely delighted to receive Jehan de Valancourt's legacy after his death. It was not that they feared any curse which might lie upon the land, but simply that the region was remote, and was home to very few followers of the goddess. The Council of Couronne, after much deliberation, sent envoys to Lanfranc de Valancourt to say that the gift of land would not be useful unless he could also provide for the hire of a company of masons and carpenters to build a temple and a house upon the site.

Lanfranc, despite that he harboured some slight resentment that the Sisters should inherit land which might have been his, agreed to assemble such a crew from those in his service, provided that the Sisters would go to the hill with them, so that their prayers and their magic could provide protection

against the effects of any curse which might lie upon the land. This was agreed.

In consequence of these decisions, a company of Sisters was dispatched from Quenelles, travelling up the River Brienne to the limit of its navigability, where they met the Valancourt builders whose task it would be to build the stones of Khemis Kezula's ruined manse into a residence and a temple.

The nine Sisters who were appointed to this mission accepted their lot, as they were bound by their vows to do, unquestioningly. Some, indeed, were pleased by the prospect. For Mother Thelinda, who was appointed Superior of the company, there was a welcome increase in authority to compensate for the disruption of her former life; and for the likes of Sister Penelope and Sister Myrica - neither of whom had ever taken to city life - there was the lure of the forest and the fresh mountain air. But there were also those whose uncomplaining acceptance masked a certain unease, and one of these was Sister Adalia.

Adalia was twenty-two years old, having served Shallya for eight years. She was the daughter of a craftsman glassworker in the service of the governor of Quenelles, who had attracted the attention of a priestess of Shallya by virtue of an unusual aptitude for spellcasting which she had shown as an adolescent.

Alas, her aptitude had failed to mature with her body, so that her cultivated skills proved to be nothing out of the ordinary.

This disappointment had not detracted from Adalia's loyalty towards the goddess while she remained in her native town, where she was close to her relatives and where all the best houses boasted at least one window made by her father. She was stern in her determination to avoid curiosity about what might have become of her had she taken a different path in life. She never asked herself whether it was right and fair that the dull woman she now was should inherit the consequences of decisions made by the over-eager and falsely-promising girl she once had been. When she was commanded to leave Quenelles, though, she soon became conscious of a certain emptiness in the secret chambers of her heart, which her prayers and acts of charity could not begin to fill.

The hardship of the early days on the slopes above Selindre could not help but magnify any unease which the Sisters felt. Although it was summer the

weather was often chilly and damp, and though the builders worked as fast as they could to erect two big houses - one for themselves and one for the Sisters - their progress was slow. The huge black stones which had formed the walls of Khemis Kezula's citadel were very difficult to shift and raise, even with block-and-tackle; and the tall trees which had to be felled for timber had hard, dark wood which blunted the carpenters' drills and saws. In the meantime, the whole company shivered in their tents.

Adalia, though she was far from being the tallest or the strongest of the Sisters, was instructed to help the workmen in their lighter tasks, fetching and carrying for them or mixing mortar. The work was so hard that her back always ached and her hands often bled, and though her magic won her some relief from such sufferings there was always more work to renew them. Myrica, seeing her distress, told her gently that the sunlight and the fresh air would soon bring colour to her cheeks and more strength to her limbs, but Adalia could discover no such change in herself as the long days went by.

The sisters and the workmen moved into the two houses as soon as the roofs were in place, though they were by no means entirely finished. Each of the sisters was alotted a room, bare-floored and bare-walled, with a pallet on which to sleep and two candle-brackets set on either side of a slit-window. So black was the stone of which the walls were made, so narrow were the windows, and so poor were the candles manufactured in Selindre, that these rooms seemed at first to be dreadfully gloomy.

Adalia's room was in the second storey, beneath the eaves. It faced north, so that the sun never shone directly through the narrow window, and it overlooked a stand of uncommonly twisted trees whose tattered crowns seemed to mutter arcane imprecations when stirred by the wind. It was by no means as comfortable as the room which she had occupied in Quenelles, whose walls had been hung with tapestries depicting flocks of flying doves, and whose latticed window had faced the rising sun - but she was resolved that she must not hate it, and it was certainly a relief to possess some space that was all her own after weeks of sharing a tent.

Mother Thelinda instructed that each of the Sisters must make her room a fit place for prayer, first by staining the dark walls white and then by inscribing on their surface the sacred symbols of Shallya: a heart of gold, a white dove in flight, and a tear-shaped drop of blood. Though none complained, all found difficulty in executing this task, for the black stones

which had once protected Khemis Kezula were resistant to the stain of purity, and whitewash had to be applied several times over before the walls would condescend to be lightened.

Adalia found the task particularly frustrating, but in the end achieved a shade of grey which did not seem intolerably grimy. By this time, the white habit which she wore seemed to have lost its crisp cleanness forever, and no matter how she scrubbed it she could only bring it to the same shade of grey which she had contrived to impart to the walls of her room. It was little comfort to her that all the other sisters had the same difficulties to afflict them.

The people of Selindre were not ungrateful for the Sisters' presence, for they had heard what power the devoted followers of Shallya had to cure the sick and ease pain. Mother Thelinda received a steady stream of pleas for aid, which never went unanswered. Though no price was asked for such assistance, the villagers began to send gifts of food and livestock - and by this means the Sisters acquired a flock of chickens and a milking-goat. They also became inheritors of the rich tradition of cautionary tales and rumours which had been handed down to the people from the times when Khemis Kezula had been their oppressor.

Among these stories there were the usual horrific accounts of cannibalism and child-sacrifice which inevitably accumulate about those of sorcerous inclination, and the usual flights of fancy regarding storm-riding daemons and monsters of the night. But there were other items too, more unusual and idiosyncratic, some of which were contained in sayings and warnings whose import was no longer properly understood. One apparently-pointless tale alleged that Khemis Kezula had made alliance with a tribe of dwarfs which had forsaken the worship of Grungni in order that another god might teach them the secret arts of crystal-making; and one mysterious instruction, known to every child in Selindre - though none knew what it meant - bade all who dared to walk upon the mountain slopes to *Beware the Glorious Light which floods the hidden valleys of the soul.*

The Sisters of Shallya were no ordinary women, but they shared the delight which all women have (which men also share, if the truth be admitted) in fearful fancies and ominous whispers. They repeated these tales avidly to one another while they worked, and though they laughed to show what little fear they had of the daemons with which long-dead Khemis Kezula had once made pacts there was always a tiny thrill of anxiety in their laughter.

Although work still remained to be done on the houses when the Sisters had whitened their walls and inscribed the sacred symbols of their faith, plans had already been made for the erection of the temple. After careful consultation with the masons, Mother Thelinda had decided that this should be sited on a square platform overlooking a steep and densely-thicketed slope. Here the eastern tower of Khemis Kezula's fortress had stood, and the first task facing the temple-builders was clearing the rubble from the site. There were few huge stone blocks here, but there was a great accumulation of smaller debris, which had long been overgrown by mosses, lichens and ferns.

Once the obscuring cloak of vegetation had been stripped away, it quickly became clear that there might be useful things to be gleaned from the wreckage. No doubt the people of Selindre had made some effort over the years to search for weapons and items of commercial value, but they had not troubled to steal away such commonplace things as wooden bowls and clay goblets, or bronze cooking implements and copper sewing-needles, for which the thrifty Sisters of Shallya could easily find a use. Mother Thelinda therefore appointed Sisters Adalia and Columella to the task of sifting through the debris as it was exposed and cleared, to recover and repair anything which could be put to use.

This was a duty which Sister Adalia found at first to be much more to her taste than fetching and carrying. It was far less wearying, and the pleasurable possibility that a new discovery might at any time be made was ample compensation for the dullness of most of the work involved. The work had its less pleasant side, for the artefacts buried in the rubble were sometimes to be found in association with grisly reminders of the fierce conflict which had raged within the fortress when Lanval invaded it, but Adalia was not afraid of skulls and skeletons and parchment-like fragments of skin.

It was not Adalia herself who discovered the first pieces of coloured glass; they were brought to her by a workman who thought them odd, though he did not realize that they might be valuable. But the glassworker's daughter knew well enough how rare and precious stained glass is, and quickly realized that the fragments must have come from a window. She demanded to be taken to the place where the shards had been found, where she began to rummage about for others.

When she found several more shards, some the size of fingernails and others the size of copper coins, she immediately commanded the workman to set aside his spade and proceed more carefully. She asked him to collect all the pieces of glass which he could find, and any strips of lead which might have been used to bind them together. In the meantime, she hurried off to tell Mother Thelinda what she had found.

Mother Thelinda was less enthusiastic than Adalia expected. Though she was city-bred and had seen stained-glass windows in the houses of noblemen, she had never looked at the windows of Quenelles with the same proud and interested eyes as Adalia. In fact, she considered such decorations to be mere frippery.

"I suppose you had better collect all you can," said the Superior dismissively, "if it can be of use or value to somebody. Perhaps we can make a gift of it to Lanfranc de Valancourt, to appease him for the loss of his craftsmen. He seems to be the kind of man who might take pleasure in toys and baubles, and I dare say that he has a clever windowmaker at his beck and call."

Adalia was annoyed that her discovery should be so casually minimized - and, as it seemed to her, her father also. However, she took what had been said to her as permission to make an effort to recover as much of the window as she could. She therefore gave Columella and the workmen instructions to be very careful in working near the spot where the first fragments had been unearthed, and to save all the shards which they found, no matter how tiny. For the rest of that day and all of the next she waited fretfully nearby, ready to pounce on any glint of coloured light which showed as the rubble was scraped away from the rock beneath.

By the evening of the second day she had hundreds of pieces of glass and dozens of pieces of the lead which had once secured the pattern of the window. The idea was born in her mind that if she could recover a sufficient

number of fragments she might eventually be able to reconstruct the pattern of the window - enough of it, at least, to know what had been depicted there.

She had no delusions as to the difficulty of the project, but she felt compelled to make the effort, so she cleared a space on the floor of her room and began to lay out the pieces there, shuffling them around in the hope that she might begin to see some semblance of order amid the chaos.

After an hour's pondering - which somehow used up the time which she should have spent at her private prayers - Adalia was forced to admit to herself that the task seemed hopeless. Although she had collected a good many fragments, many of them quite large, it was obvious that they were only a small fraction of the number into which the window had been shattered. She readily guessed that the vast majority of the remaining fragments must be very tiny, and would be very difficult to recombine even if they could ever be found. Because she had no idea what the pattern had looked like, it was hard to know where to start in trying to rebuild it.

More fragments of coloured glass turned up on the next day, and a few more on the next, but by now the workmen had completed the preparatory work of clearing the site, and it was obvious that no more pieces would be thrown up by the appointed routines of labour. Adalia turned her attention to the heaps of earth which had been shifted from the great platform, and to the cluttered slope which descended from its rim. She knew that much of the original rubble from the felling of the tower would simply have been tipped over the edge, and she knew that some of the glass from the window must have gone with it - but the slope was very steep, and the workmen had no intention of clearing the undergrowth from it.

Mother Thelinda soon relieved Adalia and Columella of the task of sorting through the debris, on the grounds that everything useful had now been recovered, and gave Adalia - who still seemed too pale and frail for heavy work - a list of domestic duties to be carried out in the house. Adalia had no option but to accept them, but found that the duties were sufficiently lenient to allow her a few hours of spare time even during the hours of daylight. She began to use these hours in looking for more fragments of glass, wherever she thought they might be found - and she found enough, day by day, to make her feel that it was worth her while to persist in the task.

Indeed, she came gradually to believe that she had a special instinct which guided her search, and might eventually bring it to a successful end.

As summer gave way to autumn and autumn to winter the hours of daylight decreased and those of darkness expanded. This reduced the amount of time which Adalia could devote to her search for pieces of glass, but increased that which she could devote to the attempt to figure out how the pieces she already had might be connected with one another. This puzzle became very absorbing indeed - so much so that it routinely absorbed the time which should have been given to her devotions - but when Mother Thelinda once suggested to her that she might be neglecting her prayers, she denied the charge vehemently.

There were several occasions when she was brought to the brink of despair, and became convinced that the project was hopeless, but on each occasion her half-formed resolution to give it up was subverted by a sudden gleam of inspiration which showed her how a group of pieces might be slotted together, or where a junction in the lead could be reconstructed. Eight years as a servant of Shallya had taught her many things, including the value of patience, and an occasional happy discovery was enough to persuade her that the task should not be abandoned.

While the pieces remained scattered on the floor of her room she could never leave them alone for long, but was always drawn irresistibly back to the puzzle. Her moments of insight gradually accumulated into an emergent understanding of the form and organization of the original work of art. She discovered that the window had been circular, and that there had been several concentric circles within the outer one. She deduced that the paler-coloured glass belonged mostly to the outer circles, with more vivid blues and roseate shades closer to the centre. She realized that the innermost circle had contained a detailed image of some kind, perhaps a representation of a bird with bright plumage.

Each of these discoveries reinforced her resolution, and encouraged her to increase her efforts, which she began to do by denying herself sleep. It was soon noticed, however, that Adalia burned more candles than any three of her companions, and she was summoned to the Superior to explain why this was so.

She took Mother Thelinda to see her work, sure that the sight of the partially-reconstructed window would be sufficient explanation and excuse,

but the Superior had no notion of it as an intriguing puzzle to be solved, and could not see the picture emerging within the confused array of lead and glass. Mother Thelinda saw the broken pattern only as a silly and trivial mess, and said so.

"You must see, Sister Adalia," she said, in a gentle and kindly fashion, "that the objective cannot be worth the effort. What could you possibly gain by completing a task whose achievement would bring no worthwhile reward? You must understand that it is not fitting for a priestess of Shallya to become obsessed with worldly things. A window of coloured glass, however beautiful, is only a window on the everyday world. Our concern is to bring the mercy of Shallya to those who suffer grief and pain, not to play with ornaments."

Adalia accepted these rebukes very mildly, but her penitence was feigned, and she was glad that Mother Thelinda did not think to offer a specific instruction commanding her to abandon her work. Nevertheless, she did resolve to try harder to perform those observances which her faith required of her.

For some days she was unable to collect more than a handful of very tiny fragments of glass from the slopes beneath the burgeoning temple. Nor, in those few days, did she use more candles than any of the other sisters. But her enthusiasm for her task was not really lessened at all; almost every piece of glass which she found was now the cause of a tangible thrill, for she was very often seized by the conviction that she knew exactly where her new find would fit into the growing whole.

The outer circles of the window came steadily nearer to completion, and she soon redoubled her efforts once again in searching for the missing fragments. When the outer circles had been restored, save for a mere handful of fugitive shards, a most astonishing thing happened.

There began to emerge from those outer rings of glass, during the hours of deepest darkness, an uncanny *glow*, which grew by degrees into a flickering silvery radiance. It was as though the window was no longer laid out on a solid floor at all, but had been set in place to transmit the effulgence of a dawnlit sky.

Had Sister Adalia been less absorbed in her project, she might have been made anxious by this mystery. She might have remembered that this window had not been an ornament in some nobleman's pretty palace, but a part of the fortress of Khemis Kezula, where it might conceivably have had some other purpose than mere decoration. She might even have recalled to mind that curious warning about "glorious light" which had passed through the company as an item of idle gossip.

Had she been able to think in this way she would then have understood that her duty to Shallya demanded that she consult her Superior at once. But her mind was filled by now with other thoughts and desires, and she had already acquired the habit of secrecy. As things were, the thought which first sprang into her mind when she saw this radiance was that it would help her to save candles, and thus be freed from further pressure to abandon her self-appointed task.

Her stratagem worked well; Mother Thelinda was satisfied with what appeared to be a return to normal conduct - and Sister Adalia was trapped in the unfolding web of her deceit, unable now to seek advice about the significance of the eerie light which lit her room for a few hours on either side of midnight.

She did not *feel* as if she was imprisoned by her deceit. Indeed, she felt more contented than she had ever been before. It was as if that emptiness within her being, of which she had only been half-aware, had been filled as neatly and cosily as it could be. She was now possessed of a completeness which all her sincere and heartfelt prayers to Shallya had somehow never provided for her.

Most of the pieces of glass to which her instinct led her as she patrolled the slopes beneath the temple were rosy or blue in colour, and the reconstruction of the circles where they belonged soon progressed to the point where almost every piece could be put unhesitatingly into place. And as these inner circles neared completion, they began to add their own measure to the light which poured into Sister Adalia's room in such a magical fashion.

Adalia loved that light - which was certainly very beautiful - and delighted in studying its many changes. It was not in the least like true sunlight, for it had a ceaseless ebb and flow in it; what had earlier been a casual flickering was now a more tempestuous agitation. Whenever she knelt beside the window, bending over it in search of the place where a particularly problematic shard belonged, her many shadows would move on the whitened walls behind her like a troop of wild dancers capering about a magical fire.

The dingy walls of her room were quite transformed by the light of the window; their greyness was utterly banished by it and the sacred symbols of Shallya's worship were completely blotted out. So too was the dreary greyness of her habit redeemed, for the light made it blaze with brightness, as though it were not a priestess's robe at all but the coloured costume of some mighty wizard of the Colleges.

Of the figure in the centre of the picture, however, Adalia could as yet see almost nothing. There were only a few fugitive pieces of glass which seemed to belong there, which gave the merest impression of feathery form, without any proper indication of the configuration of the wings, nor the least sign of beak or eye. No light came, as yet, from the innermost circle of the window.

Adalia's quest was nearly brought to an abrupt conclusion when Sister Penelope and Sister Myrica, who chanced one night to be out and about at an unusual hour, reported seeing strange lights in her window. Adalia was summoned yet again to see the Superior. She became very anxious lest it be commanded that her work must cease, and she stoutly denied that anything unusual had occurred. She insisted that she had been asleep at the time the light was reported, and knew of no possible source from which it could have come.

Because Penelope and Myrica could offer no tentative explanation of their own, Adalia's word was accepted, but Mother Thelinda took the opportunity to question her further about the fate of the stained glass which she had collected. Adalia denied that she was any longer interested in the reconstruction of the window, and said that in any case, no sizeable pieces of glass had been found for some considerable time. Because the latter part of the statement was true, the whole was believed.

After this interview, Adalia took the precaution of hanging up a dark cloth to curtain the narrow window of her room while she worked, and always left the greater window on the floor covered by a rug when she went out.

That Mother Thelinda believed Adalia's story was due in part to the conviction with which she told it, but also to the fact that she seemed so healthy and cheerful nowadays that it was impossible for any of her fellows to believe that she was going without sleep. When the sisters had come to Selindre, and for some time after, Adalia had been pinched of feature and pasty of face, and far from being the strongest of the company - but now her skin was tanned and lustrous, and her laughing eyes were as bright as a bird's.

Her companions could only think that it was the sunlight and the air, and the hard but willing labour, which were at long last changing her for the better.

Adalia no longer fell eagerly upon the few tiny slivers of glass which were occasionally found while work on the temple proceeded; indeed, she professed indifference to them. One way or another, though, the fragments disappeared into her sleeves and pockets, and were carried anxiously at the end of each evening's communal rituals to the privacy of her room. There, the periphery of the innermost circle was slowly filled in, and she waited with rapt anticipation for the vital moment when the light which streamed through the outer circles would spread to the centre - when that enigmatic image would, as she thought of it, "catch fire".

She lived for that day; nothing else seemed to matter at all.

Unfortunately, the central motif remained irritatingly absent; there were a few fragments of glass which seemed to represent feathers, and enough lead to imply that the figure was the head of a bird, but of the beak and eyes there was still no trace. By now she had searched every inch of the slope beneath the burgeoning temple most assiduously, and she knew that there was little hope of finding anything but tiny fragments there.

Without the vital pieces, there was little more of the puzzle to be done, and nothing to occupy her hands and mind in those hours when the light of another world filled her room with its gorgeous colours. Her old habits reasserted themselves, but when she prayed - without taking care to specify which deity it was to whom she addressed her prayers - she prayed only for a gift and a revelation; her prayers expressed the yearning of her obsessive

heart, which had no other object of affection than the face in the centre of the window.

For seven times seven nights the light waxed and waned, and each time it died Adalia went meekly to her bed. But on the next night, she was so filled with the glory of the light that she was utterly entranced, and was driven out by the fierceness of her hunger - out of her room and out of the house.

Winter had come by now, and the night was bitter. Snow was falling on the slopes, its whiteness all-but-invisible in the cloudy night. But she did not feel cold at all, and made her way unerringly to the site of the temple, which was nearly complete.

In the courtyard of the temple, someone was waiting for her. He carried no lantern and she could not see his face, but she knew by his stature and his voice that he must be a dwarf.

"I have something which you want," he said, "and you have something which my master desires. Will you make a contract of exchange, so that your heart's desire might be answered?"

"I will," she said. She felt as though she was lost in a dream, and in dreams one does not ask too many questions.

"Here is what you need," said the dwarf, and she felt a rough and hairy hand as he gave her a parcel of rags which had something hard and sharp-edged within it.

As the other turned to go, Adalia said: "Take whatever I have to give, in return."

And he replied: "It is already taken."

Then she took the parcel back to her room, and carefully hid it away before she went to sleep.

On the next night, when all had become quiet, she uncovered the window to let free its turbulent light, and took out her prize. She carefully unwrapped the bundle, exposing half a hundred pieces of coloured glass and a few twisted slugs of lead.

The fragments of glass were mostly small and misshapen, and it was clear that it would be no easy task to fit them together in the correct order. It had been a long time since she had so many new shards to work with, and she was delighted by the challenge. Her nimble fingers began the work of turning and sorting, flying as though impelled by an intelligence other than her own, and she felt meanwhile as though she was laughing inside. She

was very quick in slotting the pieces into place, for each one seemed to know exactly where it belonged.

The eyes she placed last, and when she placed them, she knew that her work was finished - that although a hundred tiny cracks and crannies remained in the grand design, she had done *enough*.

Incandescent light sprang from the heart of the window, and the figure detailed there was suddenly present in all its resplendent glory.

For a few fleeting seconds she still thought that the figure was the head of a bird - perhaps that legendary firebird which was still occasionally glimpsed above the cliffs of Parravon. Then, she thought that it might be the head of a griffon, like the one displayed as a trophy in the Great Hall of the Governor's Palace in Quenelles. While its colours were still limned by curves of clotted lead it might have been either of those things. But then, as the cataract of light poured through the window between the worlds, the lead which held the pieces of coloured glass seemed to melt and shrivel, so that the image ceased to be an image, and became reality.

Then she saw that the central figure was neither bird nor griffon, nor any other mere animal intelligence. Plumed and crested with gorgeous feathers he might be, but this was a *person*, whose gaze was brighter with wisdom and knowledge than the eyes of any human or elven being she had ever seen.

There was a tiny voice of warning within her, which tried to cry "*Daemon!*" in such a way as to make her afraid, but the voice seemed to Adalia to be no more than a tiny echo, feeble and forlorn - and if, as she supposed, it was the last vestige of that love and adoration which she had once given freely to Shallya, then its insignificance now was clear testimony of the transfer of her loyalty to another power.

The face which looked at her, out of that other world which was so wondrously filled with ecstatic light, was incapable of smiling - for the beaked mouth was set as hard as if it was carved from jet - and yet she was

in no doubt that he was glad to see her. She was perfectly certain that he longed to enfold her in his feathery embrace, to cover her tenderly with the splendour of his fiery plumage.
The sheer beauty of the prospect overwhelmed her, and she threw wide her arms to welcome that transcendent embrace.
Behind her, crowded upon the cold and narrow walls of that space which had been given to her for her allotted share of the world of mortal men, a hundred coloured shadows strutted and jostled, utterly unaware of their own thinness and insubstantiality, uncomprehending of the fact that they were mere whimsies of a light from beyond the limits of the earth.
Adalia, who had once been a Sister of Shallya, gave voice to a liquid trill of pure pleasure - and those eyes which she had so recently restored to their proper place focused upon her an astonishing, appalling look of love, which was full of laughter and the joy of life...
When Sister Adalia did not appear for morning prayer Sister Columella and Sister Penelope were sent to inquire whether she was ill.
They discovered her naked and supine upon the floor of her room, with her arms thrown wide and her legs apart.
It was, they said, as though she had been seared from top to toe by some incredible fire, which had burned her black. The walls of her room, and her discarded robe, were similarly black and ashen. And embedded in Adalia's vitrified flesh, sparing not a single inch of it, were thousands upon thousands of tiny pieces of glass.
These coloured fragments, as Mother Thelinda was able to observe when she was summoned by her horror-stricken messengers, gave Adalia's corpse the appearance of being encrusted with an extraordinary quantity of precious gems.
Had they not known that it could not possibly be another, Columella and Penelope told their friends, they might never have guessed that it was poor Adalia. She had been so utterly transfigured by her mysterious death that she might have been anyone at all.

THE SONG

by Steve Baxter

"Nice ring, Sam. What's the sparkly stuff, glass? Or something less expensive?"

Buttermere Warble, known to his friends as Sam, looked up with a start. On the other side of his table was a small figure with a grinning face and a thatch of brown hair. "Oh. Tarquin. It's you. Your boat's in, then. Oh, good."

Now more halflings came crowding into the tavern after Tarquin. Jasper, the barman of Esmeralda's Apron, pot-belly wobbling, growled at them to shut the damn door. Even here, deep in Marienburg on the murky rim of the Elven Quarter, the winds off the Sea of Claws had power.

The halflings pulled up stools and began settling around Sam's table. Soon he was ringed by a jostling rabble. "Join me, why don't you," Sam said drily. In his line of work it was useful to have contacts at all levels of society - but you could have too much of a good thing...

"Aw, Sam, aren't you glad to see us?" A skinny young halfling called Maximilian dug a worn pack of cards out of his woollen coat and began shuffling them.

"Oh, sure. I was getting so sick of calm, peace and quiet."

Tarquin sat opposite Sam. "So what's the story with the ring?"

Sam's ring was a fat band of gold; shards of crystal caught the light. Another young sailor bent over to see. "Broken glass must be in this year."

Sam covered the ring with the palm of his hand. "It's personal."

Tarquin shook his head in mock disapproval. "Oh, come on," he said. "We're just off the boat. Tell us while we're still sober."

"I told you, it's personal."

"How personal?"

"A tankard of ale."

Maximilian laughed. "Ah, keep it." He slapped cards on the rough tabletop. "Three Card Pegasus. That's what I want to spend my sober time on..."

But Sam pushed back the hand he'd been dealt. "Sorry, lads. Deal me out."

Tarquin sat back, mouth wide. "You're kidding. Dragon High Sam, refusing a game?"

"What is it?" Maximilian asked. "Funds low? No juicy cases recently?"

Sam shook his head. "No. I'm sworn off Pegasus, that's what."

"Why?"

"Well, it's kind of connected to the ring. But it's basically because of what happened last time I played..."
The circle of faces were fixed on him now. "Come on, Sam. Tell us."
Sam looked significantly at his tankard.
Tarquin picked it up. "Don't tell me. That's personal too, right? Well, you win, Sam. I'll get your ale. But it had better be worth it..."
Sam leaned forward and folded his arms theatrically. "Right. Picture the scene," he began. "It was in the Apron; in this very bar. This table, I think. I can't remember too clearly." Briefly the halfling's face grew dark, belying his jocular tone. "I'd... had a bad day. I'd taken it out on one or two tankards - " "So tell us something new."
"I was playing Pegasus. And losing. I couldn't even cover the pot. But there were only two of us left in the hand." He paused. "And?"
"And I held three Dragons." A collective sigh rippled around the table.
My only opponent was called Eladriel (Sam went on). An elf. Tall, with a streak of gold in the silver of his hair; quite distinguished looking, like a Lord almost, even with his knees crammed under the halfling-sized tables. Slumming it a bit down here in the Apron, obviously. (Jasper growled in warning.)
I remember his eyes. Black as a bird's, they were; they pinned me as I tried to decide what to do. "Well, Sam?" Eladriel said. "Do you fold?" I took another pull at my tankard and tried to think straight. Only three Unicorns can beat three Dragons; we all know that. But I'd lost too much. "No," I said. "I don't fold." "Then cover the pot." "You know I can't," I said a little bitterly. Eladriel smiled, showing even teeth. "Fold or cover," he said. I stared at my three-Dragon hand. "I'll use a marker." Eladriel ran a delicate finger over the edge of his three cards. "Now, come," he said slily. "Markers in a place like this? I think not. You don't have anything of value?" I knew without looking. "Nothing." Eladriel tutted. "Everyone owns something, no matter how low they sink." "Thanks a lot." I stared at those black eyes. "Fold or cover," he snapped.
"Name it," I said thickly. "Name the stake you want."
His voice was low. "Are you serious?"
"Name it."
"Your mind," he said rapidly. "Your very being. Your last asset. Gamble your mind, my friend."

Another player reached out of the darkness and touched my arm. "No, Sam. Fold."
"I know you, Warble," Eladriel hissed. "You are... an investigator, are you not? And one of some repute. Your mind is good... for a halfling - "
Now anger mixed in with the booze and the fatigue - just as the elf wanted, I suppose now - and I decided I was going to teach him a lesson.
The coal eyes glowed. Three Dragons leapt at the edge of my vision.
"I'm in," I said.
"Sam, this is crazy - "
"I'm in. And I'll see your hand."
Eladriel smiled. And he laid his cards on the table.
You know what they were.
"I know a little battlefield magic," said Eladriel briskly, and he drew a small, wasp-waisted bottle from his coat. "I'm an old soldier, you see. This won't hurt, Sam."
He passed his fingers before my face, once, twice -
I stared at his three grinning Unicorns and the world fell away.
I felt warm, but numb. As if I'd lain in a bath for too long. But my head was still working. So I was alive.
Or was I? Could this be the Afterlife? I tried opening my eyes. I saw a fat face, round ears, a huge pot-belly.
It was Jasper, bending over me.
"I'm finding the Afterlife a little disappointing so far, I have to say." My voice was thick, my mouth dry, but it all worked.
Jasper straightened up and snarled in disgust. "Eight days out flat haven't dulled your tongue, then."
"How long?" I tried to sit up. My back - and backside- were stiff and cold. I'd been lying on rough sacks in what seemed to be the cellar of the Apron.
Jasper began shifting crates around the cold brick floor. My view of him was oddly washed-out, as if I was looking through a thin mist. "It was like you were asleep. Kept you clean and fed, though," he added gruffly.
I stood shakily, legs tingling. "Yes, but by the fields of the Moot, Jasper, couldn't you have moved me around a bit? Haven't you ever heard of bedsores? The blood pools, you see - "
Jasper grunted. "You're lucky to be able to give cheek, after that damn fool bet. Remember?"

I nodded, rubbing my neck. "But, Jasper. I held three Dragons. What could I do?"
"Not risked your life. I didn't expect you to wake."
I thought it over. "To be honest, neither did I. People who have their minds taken normally don't, do they?"
He hoisted a barrel over each broad shoulder. "And by the way. You had a visitor."
"What? Who?"
"While you were asleep. A messenger from an Elven Lord, he said. Go to the large house at the north end of Lotharn Street. You'll find something of value. That's what he said."
"What Lord? What thing? What?"
"What? What? I preferred you when you were asleep... You're the investigator; you work it out." Jasper trudged up the cellar stairs. He called back without turning, "There's food in the kitchen. And your gambling companion kindly left you the pack of cards. I put it in your pocket."
"Thanks. Ah... Jasper," I said, following him. "I owe you."
Jasper grunted. "Just leave money for the food."
"Lotharn Street, eh..?"
I climbed out of that cellar into an early morning. A thick mist lay over Marienburg. The mist glowed with sunlight. I walked north through the Elven Quarter, breathing deep.
Now, you know Lotharn Street. You climb gradually until, at the northern end, you reach a fine view of the city as it sprawls over the islands in the mouth of the Reik. That morning the Hoogbrug Bridge seemed to arch into the sky and I could see the sails of a Kislevite frigate jutting out of the mist around the feet of the Bridge-
Yes, all right, Tarquin; I am getting on with it. The point I'm making is that it was a great-to-be-alive morning, a morning when your skin tingles and your blood runs so fast you feel like doing handstands...
Except I didn't feel like that. I felt as if I was hardly there at all.
To me the colours of the city were pale, as if I was standing in a faded painting. I strained to hear the fog bells of that Kislevite freighter, but my ears seemed stuffed with wool.
Earlier I'd walked past a Tilean street trader, a fat, swarthy human who sold broiled meat on sticks. I couldn't smell the hot meat. And when I bought a

piece it tasted like soft wood.
I didn't feel ill, you understand, despite my days unconscious. Just - absent. Not complete.
For the first time I began to feel frightened. After all, I'd had my mind, my very self, taken away - and given back.
Or had I? What if I was no longer complete? How would I feel? And why would anyone play such a trick?
I had a feeling this mysterious Elven Lord would have the answer. And I wasn't sure I'd like what I'd hear.
At the northern end of the Street a house stood alone. It was surrounded by a head-high wall topped with iron spikes. The spikes were barbed. Cute, I thought.
There was a thick wooden gate, standing open; I walked through into a courtyard of cobbles. The house itself sat like a huge toad in the middle of the courtyard, a box of dreary stone with tight window slits.
The door was a slab of weathered wood with a brass knocker in the shape of a war dog's head. I thought it would bite me when I lifted it.
The door creaked open and out of the darkness thrust a face like a melted mask.
I jumped back. I couldn't help it. A scar like a strip of cloth ran from the scalp right down one side of the face. The chest on that side was crumpled like a crushed egg, and one arm was a lump of gristle.
That wreck of a face twisted into a half-grin.
I managed to say, "My name is - "
"Sss-ammm." The lips would barely close, and spittle sprayed over a distorted chin. "I know. He'shh ex-pected you."
"Who?"
But the creature just turned slightly and, with the good arm, gestured me in.
The door was barely open. I had to squeeze past, and the wrecked arm brushed against me, cold as old meat. I thought I'd throw up. The old cripple grinned wider.
The house was built around a single large room. A little light leaked through the slit windows as if by accident.
The room contained a bottle.
The bottle was about the size of my fist and it had a wasp waist. It sat on a simple table at the centre of the stone floor.

Yes, Tarquin, there was more in that room than a bottle. In fact there was a whole lot of precious stuff. I'll come to that. But to me, you see, that bottle glowed like a pearl in mud. I walked up to it and stared, drawn, almost afraid to touch -

"Hands off."

The voice was painfully familiar. A tall figure emerged from the shadows at the back of the room. I wrenched my gaze from the bottle long enough to take in a fine, middle-aged face, a golden streak in silver hair.

"Eladriel," I said. "The card player. Of course. So you really are a Lord..."

Talking was an effort. My eyes dropped back to the bottle and I felt my hands rise, tugged to the glass as if by magnetism -

There was a growl at my neck, a breath that stank of sour milk.

"Down, Aloma!" Eladriel snapped.

Yes, Tarquin; he said *Aloma*, a girl's name. I was as surprised as you are.

"And you," said Eladriel. "Arms by your side."

I did as he said. The foul breath moved away. Eladriel relaxed and walked closer. "No need to be frightened of Aloma," he said, smiling. "As long as you behave yourself."

"Aloma? He's a she? I mean... it? Er - you're kidding."

"Not at all. Used to fight at my side in my younger days. Without her I doubt if I would have done half as well on all those campaigns. Mightn't have survived, even. With her help I got out with enough profit to buy my way into a Marienburg shipping concern and to settle into this - " he waved an arm " - comfortable retirement. Dear old Aloma - "

The Aloma-thing blushed. Yes, blushed. It was like watching a side of mutton go foul.

Eladriel went on, "Her strength's extremely rare, of course." He whispered behind a delicate hand, "I suspect there's a little Ogre blood in the mix there somewhere... Yes, dear Aloma," he said more loudly. "Getting a bit long in the tooth now, of course, but still as tough as any two warriors... and in case it should occur to you to try anything let me point out that her single good arm could crush your spine like a twig."

"Uh-huh. I'm reconsidering the pass I was planning."

"And she was quite a beauty before her injury."

"Really?"

Eladriel's smile faltered. "Well, no, not really. But she has her uses. Now then, gambler, no doubt you're wondering why I've asked you here."
With a supreme effort I stepped back from the table. "Get to the point, Eladriel. What's in the bottle?"
"Bottle?" he asked innocently. "Which bottle? Do you know what he's talking about, Aloma?"
My hostess cackled like a blocked drain. "What-t boss-tie?" she slurred.
"Oh, very funny," I snapped. "What a double act."
Eladriel nodded calmly, still smiling. "I think you already know what's in there, Sam. Can't you feel it? Aren't you drawn to it? Haven't you been feeling a little - not all there?"
Aloma sniggered. I held myself still, dreading his answer.
"You are in there, Sam," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "The rest of you. Now listen carefully. That bottle is sealed. And I've put another of my old battlefield spells on it, an aura of invulnerability. Do you know what that means? The glass can't be broken; it will resist any blow. Only I can open the bottle, release you and make you whole, you see. And any time I want I can do this."
Blank.
I was lying on the floor. I must have hit the table on my way down; my forehead throbbed.
"Easy as snapping a finger," Eladriel said softly. "Neat, isn't it?"
I tried to keep my voice level. "What do you want, Eladriel?"
"I can tell you what I don't want. And that's to waste my strength holding half a mind that was a bit lightweight to start with. Tell you what, why don't we trade?"
He turned and began to pace about the room, glancing over objects stacked around the walls on shelves and low tables. There was a painting of a bowl of flowers; Eladriel ran his finger around the edge of its frame. Then he moved to a sculpture of a girl's face, turned up to the sky; Eladriel cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand.
"See this stuff?" he asked. "Human art, you know. It has an element of... vividness that's missing from Elven work, I always feel. A rawness, perhaps. I'm a collector, you see." He coughed modestly. "I've gained a certain reputation in some circles as a connoisseur of early Tilean belt buckles. Perhaps you've seen my monograph on the subject - "

"Oh, of course," I said. "During a hard night in the Apron my mates and I talk about nothing else. Tilean bloody belt buckles."
Eladriel raised a manicured eyebrow but otherwise ignored me. "There is quite a little community of us, you know. Collectors of human art. And some of us," he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "go a little further."
"Further?"
"Some go so far as to - ah... collect, shall we say - the artists as well. Do you understand? Poets, painters, dancers..."
I couldn't believe it. "Elves running a market in humans? Eladriel, there are five hundred elves in this city... and about twenty thousand humans. If they ever find out there's a human slave market they'll kill you in your beds."
He looked shocked. "Slave? What a sordid word. These little creatures are well cared for and are free to practice their art before an appreciative audience. What more could they ask?"
I considered. "Freedom? Choice?"
He ignored me. "And of course, it makes economic sense. Why buy eggs if you can own the goose? Besides, those humans who do know about it will make sure the rest don't find out. Elven money means a lot to this city."

"As I was saying. There was one particular artist. A singer. A girl called Lora... quite lovely, apparently. Well, she came up for auction one day, and there was quite a buzz in the circle. Even to hear her sing, just once... But there was a pre-emptive bid. From *Periel*." He spat the name.

"*The* Periel? The Elven Lord who owns the island close to High Bridge?"
"He may." Eladriel sniffed. "Well-to-do, I understand."
"Right," I said. "Probably as 'well-to-do' as the rest of you Elven Lords put together."
Eladriel sniffed again, looking carefully indifferent. "Well, because of Periel no other elf got to hear Lora sing."
I laughed. "And I bet that must have driven you wild."
Eladriel sighed. "Lora may be the finest singer of her generation. I really must hear her voice."
"Oh, sure. Purely for aesthetic reasons. Tweaking Periel's nose has nothing to do with it."

"Even just once, a single song. Well, then. So sorry to see you go." He moved his arms in a brushing motion. The hideous Aloma grunted and began to shuffle towards the door. "So is that clear?"
I was baffled. "What?"
"Why, what I want you to do for me, of course. Arrange for me to hear Lora sing."
There was a lump of ice forming in my stomach; I heard my breathing go shallow. "Steal her from Periel? The most powerful elf in the city? But... how?"
He looked elegantly surprised. "Why are you asking me? You're supposed to be the resourceful investigator. That's your problem, isn't it? Here." He handed me another bottle, identical to the one containing a bit of me. "This also has the protective aura. Maybe you'll find it handy."
I stared at the bottle. "I suppose there's no point asking for my usual thirty crowns a day plus expenses - "
Blank.
I was on the floor again, " - but in the circumstances I'll be happy to waive the fee," I said as I picked myself up and pocketed the bottle. "Don't bother, Aloma, I'll show myself out. By the way. Lay off the eyeshadow. Be subtle..."
It wasn't easy getting to Periel. As one of the city's most successful Sea Lord merchants he's rich enough to have bought layers of privacy.
My first problem was that he doesn't even live in the Elven Quarter. So I chose a shapeless old coat and a red woollen hat, and I set off into the lowlier human districts of Marienburg, working my way towards the mouth of the Reik.
It wasn't a pleasant experience. Not everyone welcomes strangers, even halflings. So I walked through stench-ridden streets with my shoulders hunched and my head down, enduring suspicious stares.
Second problem. Periel lives on one of the rocky river-mouth islands. He likes his privacy. The island's not the biggest piece of rock in the Reik - but it's all Periel's, it has a great view of the open sea, and there are no bridges to it. You wouldn't think that was possible in this city of bridges; but so it is. So I needed a boat.
I found a depressing little tavern on Riddra Island, at the west end of the Suiddock. There were rusty fishhooks and patches of damp on the walls; the

tables were sticky with dirt and the ale was gritty. I never thought I'd miss the Apron, but this place was even worse.
(Joke, Jasper. Joke.)
There were three customers in there, sitting in gloomy silence at separate tables. I selected the cleanest-looking of them, bought two tankards of damp grit, and sat down.
The fisherman eyed me warily - he couldn't take his eyes off my red hat - but gradually, in grunts and half-sentences over more tankards, he began to talk.
His name was Kurt. He was a wiry man with a shock of black hair. He survived by scraping herring out of the Sea of Claws. His boat's timbers had a creeping fungus, the herring catch was down that year, and his wife was having it off with a cod-grader called Norbert.
Boys, he was the conversational equivalent of a case of piles.
But he was due to take his boat out at high tide that evening; and - after a little encouragement - he agreed to carry a passenger on a small detour.
And so I found myself rowing - yes, rowing - Kurt's creaking boat through the straits of Marienburg. Kurt sat at the stern, picking at a net with black fingernails. The light was fading but it was still brighter than the inside of that tavern at midday. Kurt began to stare at me. I stared back.
"You've got a secret," he said at length, "and I know what it is."
My heart thumped. "Oh, yes?"
"Yes." He eyed me shrewdly.
I sized up the situation. Kurt was not much taller than me but a lot broader - and, thanks to Eladriel, I wasn't all there. If Kurt had felt like it he wouldn't have had much trouble taking my purse and dumping me over the side.
"What are you going to do about it, then?" I asked, eyes locked with his.
Surprisingly he shrugged. "Nothing. Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."
"It is?"
"Yes." He turned his face away from the wind, spat out a chunk of green phlegm, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I know why you're wearing that hat," he grunted at length.
"Hat?" I put a hand to my red woollen cap.
He placed his hand on his scalp, grabbed a handful of hair, and pulled the whole black mass right off his head. The afternoon sunlight glinted off his

skull. "See?" he said, waggling his wig. "You're as bald as an egg under that stupid hat, aren't you?"
I agreed enthusiastically and kept rowing.
Periel's island was a stub of rock a few hundred paces across. A few scrubby trees clung to nooks in near-vertical cliffs. A tower, simple but well-built, stood to attention at the peak of the island.
We circled the cliffs until we came to a tiny harbour. There was a small, well-kept boathouse at the top of a beach of pebbles. The place was deserted.
His toupee jammed back on his head, Kurt tied up against a jetty. He agreed to wait until dawn, winking and staring at my head.
I walked up the beach, footsteps crunching. There was a narrow staircase cut into the rock behind the boathouse and I climbed a hundred steps to the island's flat summit.
The wind off the sea scoured that plateau and made me pull my coat close. The last of the western light picked out the tower's clean lines, and I could see a door. It looked ajar.
I stared for a while, wondering. Could it be that easy? I took a few tentative steps forward -
I heard a snuffling breath, like a pig digging for truffles, a footstep thumping into the soft earth.
No, it wasn't that easy, I decided. I stood stock still, hands empty and at my side. And round the curve of the tower came the last barrier around Periel's privacy.
He was four times my height and about as broad - and that was just his chest. Stumpy legs thumped into the earth. A breechclout swaddled a thick waist. His head was small and pig-like, and little eyes peered at me with suspicion. He hefted a club from one huge hand to the other. The club was tipped with iron bolts. His skin was the colour of dung, and matted with sweat, like a horse's. Let me tell you, boys, his personal hygiene left a lot to be desired.
I smiled. Well, I tried to. "How do you do?"
The creature hissed softly.
"You're an ogre, aren't you?"
His voice was like a wooden box full of gravel. "And you are not invited."
"I'm here to see the Lord Periel," I said briskly.

The ogre ran a rope-like finger over the tip of his club. "Shall I brain you," he mused, "before throwing you into the sea?" His shoulders moved in a grotesque shrug. "Why make a mess?" And he laid his club delicately on the ground and advanced on me, hands spread.

Anyway after I'd got the ogre's club off him and had knocked him unconscious, I made my way to the open door and -

What do you mean, you don't believe it? You really want the boring details? Oh, very well...

That ogre came closer, muscles working in his shoulders. Frantically I tried to concentrate, to think through the cobwebs Eladriel had left around my senses. I remember thinking that I'd finally run out of cards to play - And that gave me a clue.

Quick as a flash I dragged my battered pack of cards from my pocket. "Wait!" I said.

The ogre kept coming, his feet leaving craters in the ground. I began shuffling the cards and working simple tricks. Gradually the boar-like eyes were attracted by the flashing colours. The ogre slowed to a stop, staring at the cards; and those huge hands dropped reassuringly.

"Before you so justifiably throw me off the cliff," I said smoothly, still working the cards, "please let me make you a gift."

The ogre looked at me, and at the cards. "Thanks," he said, and reached down for the pack with one hand and for my throat with the other.

"Hold on," I cried, skipping back. "I have to show you how to use them."

The ogre studied me doubtfully, probing a mouth-sized navel with one finger. Rapidly I dealt out two hands of three cards. "Let me show you a game. It's called Three Card Pegasus.

It usually ends in a fight, and you'd enjoy that, wouldn't you? We both take three cards. Now then, I look at my hand... Not bad. What have I got to stake? How about this - " I took off my woollen hat and laid it on the ground between us.

The ogre ran a puzzled thumb over his cards.

"And what's your stake?" I asked brightly.

He growled menacingly.

"Well, let's make this a demonstration hand, shall we?" I went on rapidly. "Now show me your cards... Oh," I exclaimed happily, "I only have Eagle

high, but you have a pair of Dragons! You've won! Here." I held out the hat. "It's yours."
The ogre took the hat, poked at it dubiously, and then jammed it over his skull.
"Yes, well, the red wool clashes a bit with your dominant pigshit brown," I observed, "but never mind. Now, another hand?"
The ogre nodded his great head. He hissed over the cards and stamped his thick feet in a kind of dance.
Well, it took about half an hour, I suppose. By the end of that time I'd not only got my hat back; I also owned the ogre's breechclout, his unique collection of the droppings of the Giant Bat, the right of marriage to his first-born daughter... and his club.
The ogre sat on the damp ground staring miserably out to sea, picking at the breechclout I'd loaned him back. "Never mind," I said, feeling almost sorry for him, "that's the way the cards run sometimes." And, with all my strength, I smashed the club into the back of his neck.
All right? Can I get on with the story now?
As I was saying... I made my way to the tower's open door. Heart thumping a bit, I stepped out of the wind and into musty darkness.
Torches cast blobs of light over bare stone walls. I was in a corridor which led to a patch of brightness. I stopped to listen, let my eyes adjust to the gloom. Then I heard the song, drifting along the corridor:

...the laughter of children can never be held
By silver box or golden band;
The bird's song dies in the ornate cage
And the snowflake melts in the palm of the hand...

It was the voice of a girl. I stood there, transfixed. How can I describe it? ...Well, perhaps I shouldn't try. I can only say that even in my misty state that song of trapped beauty reduced me to tears.
Blinking, I took silent steps along the corridor. At the end I stopped, still in shadow, and peered into the central chamber.
Torches high on the walls cast a gloomy radiance. A fire flickered in an iron grate. A table stood at the centre of the carpeted floor, and on it rested a half-empty pitcher of wine, a single glass goblet, the remains of what must have been a rich meal.

And in a large, leather-covered chair reclined the Lord Periel himself. He was taller than Eladriel, his hair perhaps a little thinner, but he was dressed rather more sumptuously in a cloak of soft leather. As he listened his fingers were steepled before his face and his eyes were closed. I thought I could see a single tear glinting on his eyelid, and my respect for him rose a little.

Half-hidden to me in my shadowed nook, the girl singer stood meekly before the Lord's table. She entered the chorus of her song again -

...silver box or golden band...

- and, fearful not only of detection by Periel but also – oddly - of confronting the source of all that beauty, I stepped forward.

She was human, but with an almost Elven slimness. Her hair was night dark and plaited around a silver comb. She wore a dress of the purest white silk, and held her hands before her as she sang.

Her face was downcast... the face of a prisoner, I thought. She can't have been more than seventeen. Her beauty was of an inner, almost ethereal type, and I wanted to cherish her.

Now the song reached its climax and her voice soared:

And the snowflake melts in the palm of the hand...

She reached a high note that seemed almost beyond my hearing, and there was an odd ringing -

- and the goblet shattered into a thousand pieces. Periel opened his eyes with a start.

I stepped back quickly. The merchant Lord toyed with the fragments on the table. "Lora," he said softly, "your voice is perfect beyond the dreams of mortals."

She bowed her head.

He stood, stretched, gathered his cloak tight around him. "Well, I must retire. Another day haggling with the City Fathers over trade agreements tomorrow. If only I could spend more time at home with my treasures... of which the most exquisite is my Lora. Goodnight, my dear." And he made his way up a staircase that led from the back of the chamber into darkness. I heard a door close softly, somewhere above.

The girl Lora relaxed once her master had gone. She sat on a stool at the table and began picking at a bowl of fruit, humming softly to herself in that gorgeous voice. As her hands flickered over the fruit I saw how her fingers were encrusted with jewellery. She made a delicate tableau in that gloomy

place, a work of art as fine as any of Eladriel's. I just stood there for a while, hardly daring to breathe, drinking in that beauty (and no, Maximilian, I did not notice the sort of detail you're interested in.)

At last I stepped into the light, fingers to my lips. She kicked over her stool and stumbled backwards, eyes wide. Grapes dropped from her fingers to the carpet. She crammed one tiny fist into her mouth.

I mimed hush. If she screamed I was finished. I took another step into the room, trying to smile. "I won't harm you," I whispered. "I'm your friend. I'm here to help you."

She seemed to relax a little. She dropped her hand from her face but kept her blue eyes fixed on mine.

My blood rushed like a waterfall; and the nearness of that beauty nearly overwhelmed me.

"Who... who are you?" she asked.

I sighed. Even her speech had a quality like... like the finest lyre which -

(All right, all right, I'll get on with it.)

"My name's Sam Warble," I said. I raised my hat.

"What do you want?"

"Another Lord called Eladriel knows that you're being kept here by Periel. And he sent me to you." I sat on her stool, and kept smiling. I told her the tale of my recruitment by Eladriel, and gradually she came forward into the light.

"But that's awful," she said at last. "How could this Eladriel do such a thing to your mind?"

I shrugged, trying to look courageous. "I'm not important. What matters now is you, my lady."

"Are you here to free me?"

"Would you like that?" I asked gravely. "Does Periel harm you?"

"Oh, no," she said, with a flutter of manicured fingers. "Far from it. He's a perfect gentleman. He feeds and clothes me well; I have everything I ask for. I don't even have to sing if I don't feel like it." She touched her cheek, shaking her head gently. "I have everything but my freedom."

I nodded, tears filling my eyes again. "'And the snowflake melts in the palm of the hand...' You were singing about yourself, weren't you? You, Lora, you are that snowflake."

She covered her eyes delicately. "I am a free spirit who is withering in captivity."
"Where are you from?"
"A little village a few days' travel from Marienburg, on the edge of the Reikwald Forest. My family are poor but honest. My father raises pigs."
"Pigs?"
"Pigs. One day emissaries of the Lord Periel came riding into the farm on their fine horses, waving their bags of gold at my father..." Fragile shoulders shook, and she wept softly.
Well, I'll tell you, boys, it was all too much for me.
I leapt up onto the stool and took her shoulders; her warmth flowed into my hands. "Listen to me. Eladriel didn't send me to free you. He sent me to capture you, to return you to him.
You'd exchange one gaoler for another. But I'm not going to do it."
I took her hand and led her towards the corridor - towards freedom. But she pulled her hand from mine and backed into the centre of the room. "What are you doing?"
"Come with me." I felt my cheeks glow with passion. "I'll free you from the clutches of Periel, but I will not give you to Eladriel. I'll hire horses and return you to your family... Trust me."
She looked at me doubtfully, toying with a particularly large ring. "You'll return me? What, to the pig farm? And all that dirt?"
I still didn't understand. "Well, it might be a bit muddy, but it's freedom!"
Lora ran her hands over the exotic fruit, touched her silken gown. "I was never very fond of pigs," she said thoughtfully.
"But you're a free spirit who is withering in captivity. And so on." I was getting confused.
"Oh, I am! I am! It's just..." She giggled. "Well, look, perhaps it would be better if you came back another day. Would that be terribly inconvenient?"
I couldn't believe my ears. "Come back another... My lady, I am not here to sell potatoes. This is not a routine visit. Do you have any idea what I've been through?"
She smiled nervously and pushed at stray strands of hair. "It's just that there's so much to pack... Well, you know how it is."
And then I saw it. "Ah. Yes, Lora. I think I do know how it is." A look of understanding passed between us. You see, lads, she was a songbird who

had grown far too used to her comfortable cage. And who can blame her?
"Perhaps I should come back another day, then."
She smiled eagerly. "Oh, yes, I think that would be so much better. Thank you for your thoughtful visit - but wait." Suddenly she sounded genuinely concerned. "What about you?"
"Me?"
"If you go back to this Eladriel empty-handed, won't he hurt you?"
"That's a point," I said, my common sense returning painfully. "Yes, that certainly is a point. I seem to be stuck, don't I?..." And then I had an idea. "Or maybe not. I wonder - "
I pulled out Eladriel's magic wasp-waisted bottle. "Lora, would you mind singing your song again? I think I may be able to trap it in this bottle; there's a spell on it, you see. Perhaps that will be enough for Eladriel."
A look of pretty doubt creased her oval face. "Well, of course, if you think it will help. But won't my singing shatter the glass? You must have seen what I did to Periel's goblet."
I scratched my head. "I think you're right. Eladriel's invulnerability spell is designed to ward off impacts, not the effects of a song." I wrapped the bottle in my woollen hat. "Let's hope this will protect it." And then, as I thought through all the possibilities of the situation, I felt a smile spread over my face. "And if this works out, it could be the best solution of all..."
So, her voice barely a whisper, Lora sang for me.
Her words reached again into my heart. I clutched the bottle desperately, trying not to make a fool of myself. Once more she reached the final line. "'And the snowflake melts in the palm of the hand...'" I felt the bottle quiver within its woollen cocoon.
But it held. The last echo died away, and I shoved the stopper into the bottle's neck.
"Thank you," I said, wiping away tears. "Lora... I will never forget you, and - "
There was a rumble, a heavy footstep on the stair. "Lora? I heard your voice. Are you all right?"
Lora's eyes went wide. "Periel!" she hissed. "We've woken him. You must go."
"Of course." And - after one precious brush of my lips on her hand - I ran down the corridor.

Eladriel raged. I stood there in his boxy home on Lotharn Street, enduring it; it was like being at the eye of a storm. Beside me, licking her broken lips and cackling, stood the delicious Aloma.

I tried to concentrate on what Eladriel was saying, looking for an angle. But even now I could barely keep my eyes from a small bottle perched on a ledge behind Eladriel... a bottle that contained the rest of me.

"What," Eladriel howled, his mouth inches from my face, "is to stop me from snapping you in two right now?"

I took a deep breath and played my only card. "This," I said, and I held up my prize from Periel's island.

Eladriel snatched the bottle. "Well?"

"I could not steal the girl," I said, head hanging. "After all, a half-bred clod like me could never hope to match the brilliance of a Lord like you or Periel - "

Eladriel grunted. "Don't state the obvious."

"But," I went on doggedly, "I have brought, as a pitiful consolation, a single song."

"A song?"

"Just remove the stopper, my Lord."

Eladriel, looking puzzled, did so. And Lora's perfect voice drifted into the room.

I forgot my peril, and tried to relish these last seconds of pleasure. Whatever happened, I would never hear that voice again. Eladriel shook his head, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief. And beside me Aloma blew her huge nose into her hand. Some people are just gross.

The song was nearly over now, and the voice began to climb.

... melts in the palm...

And the bottle shattered in Eladriel's hand. He jumped, startled, and let the fragments fall to the floor.

I felt a rush of blood and breathed deeply, exhilarated. Because - as I had hoped - there had been a second shattering, like an echo, from a shelf behind Eladriel; and I was whole again.

Eladriel turned on me with a growl. I fell to my knees and talked fast. "My Lord, I beg for mercy. I did all I could. You did say that a single song from Lora would be enough. And I've given you that..."

Eladriel towered over me, breathing hard, the lingering beauty of the song obviously wrestling with his basic meanness. Finally he stepped back. "Very well, Sam. Get up. I'll spare you. This time."
Surreptitiously, moved by an odd impulse, I scraped together a few fragments of the song bottle and pocketed them before I stood.
"At least I heard Lora once. And I'm sure I can find more uses for you."
Eladriel turned and made for the alcove within which he'd placed the second bottle. "But you'd better improve your performance in the future. Remember I still hold your..."
He fell silent. He'd reached the alcove, and was running a baffled hand through bits of glass. Then he swivelled, his face a rich purple.
I stood there trying not to tremble, waiting to be struck down by Eladriel's renewed rage. The moment stretched.
Then, beside me, there was a hideous wheezing sound. It was Aloma laughing. Eladriel and I turned and stared.
"The sh-song," she spluttered. "It broke the oth-th-ther boshttle and sh-set him free. He'sh tricked you, my Lord..."
She cackled on. And after a few seconds, wonder of wonders, Eladriel's face creased into a smile. "She's right. You've got the better of me, haven't you? Go on. Get out."
"What?"
"Get out!" he roared, laughing. "Before I change my mind."
I got.
"...and that's why," Sam Warble finished, "I'm off gambling. Okay?" And he downed the last of his ale.
Tarquin was rubbing his chin. "Not a bad yarn, I suppose, but it doesn't quite tie up. What's it got to do with the ring?"
Sam looked surprised. "Why, isn't it obvious? I took the fragments of Lora's bottle and had them set in gold, as soon as I could afford it. Just a little souvenir." And he stroked the ring tenderly.
Tarquin shook his head and stood up. "No. That's too glib, Sam. Good try. Listen, do you want to come for some food down the Admiral's Galley?"
Sam smiled. "Not tonight. Leave me with my memories. I'll be all right."
Tarquin laughed. "Suit yourself."
The others stood and pulled their coats closed. Maximilian picked up his cards. "Give you a tip, Sam."

"What's that?"
"You kept me with you until you got to the ogre. I just couldn't swallow that bit. I mean, who would stake something as unique as a collection of Giant Bat droppings on a pathetic pair of Dragonkin? I ask you." Shaking his head, he followed the rest.

Sam, left alone, shrugged and studied his ring for a few minutes. Then he blew gently over the inset glass. The shards chimed as if with a hundred tiny voices, and fragments of words could be heard. ...*snowflake melts*... *laughter of children*...

Jasper came to the table to collect the discarded tankards. "So no one believes your tall stories, eh, Sam?"
Sam smiled. "They saw right through me, didn't they? I'll just have to try harder. Oh, Jasper - listen, do you know anyone interested in a collection of Giant Bat droppings? Price negotiable..."

THE VOYAGE SOUTH

by Nicola Griffith

The night was thick and hot, glossy foliage twined dense and motionless over the waterway; all Ariel could hear was the soft plash of oars and the steady creak as she and her sister leaned forward then back, pulling their boat deeper into the trees. It was the first time she had rowed a boat since she and Isabel were young enough to run wild on the de Courtivron family estates. She could see nothing. The air was heavy with evening heat and the drifting perfume of forest orchids. There was a storm coming.
"Here."
The boat scraped along the overgrown jetty. Among the trees, there was a crumbling statue. It was strange, half man and half woman. One of the arms was missing. The features were still beautifully clear and fine.
They climbed out; Isabel looped the rope through an iron ring Ariel had not seen.
"This way. There's a path."

This was not the first time Isabel had been here, then. The realization changed things. Ariel was not used to knowing less than her younger sister.
She stopped to adjust her beltpouch then followed Isabel along the path. Rotting leaves deadened her footfalls.
Ariel recognized only one person: the red-haired younger son of a family who, like the de Courtivrons, were summering in the higher ground by the forest, away from the heat and stink of bustling Quenelles. Isabel seemed to know everyone.
Separated from her sister, Ariel wandered around the clearing. Someone offered her a pipe: Stardust. The druids of the old religion used it, she knew that much. The smoke was rich and satisfying; as it snaked down her throat, she imagined it turning different colours, curling pink and mauve through her lungs. She drank some wine but ate nothing; by now, the food looked too beautiful to eat. She smoked some more.
The people looked beautiful, too. Torchlight made their eyes glitter like stars, cold and far off. Their clothes had become gauzy and insubstantial, like her own. She rubbed her shift; it ran between her thumb and forefinger like milk. She smiled.
"Ari." Torchlight turned Isabel's hair into a shimmer of hot gold. "Come on," she held out her hand, "it's beginning."
The clearing was full of people and torches. Shadow licked and fluttered across bare arms and legs, across faces that were all turned in one direction. On the far side of the clearing stood another statue. This one was whole, and splendid. The right arm, the woman's arm, held a jewelled sceptre. The right breast, a woman's breast, was bared. The nails of both hands and both feet were gilded.
And people were queuing before a man who held a small clay pot.
"Olla milk," Isabel breathed, "all the way from Araby." Her eyes were round, brilliant blue. "It costs more than a princess' dowry."
Ariel hardly heard her; she drifted in her own private dream. Then she was standing before the man. Like the statue, his chest was bared on the right side. She watched muscle move smoothly under his skin as he raised the bowl, dipped his fingertips, touched them to her lips, the inside of her wrists. Numbness spread across her face, up her arms. Colours writhed. Waves of silver washed through her head. She wandered off into the trees.

The moss was cool. She pushed her fingers past it and deep into the loam. The earth was a soft-breathed beast who held her fingers in its mouth. She lay on her back. It was so dark that she could not see where the tops of the trees met the sky. Thunder grumbled; she was sticky with sweat. Music wound thin and light between the trunks.

Voices. She turned her head slowly. The red-haired man and a woman slipped through the trees; Ariel recognized Isabel. She watched, invisible.

Isabel's clothes fell to the ground one by one, like butterflies. From the folds of his tunic, the man produced a small pot. He held it in his palm. Isabel shivered as he dug out a glob of the olla milk.

"The cost..."

"I've found a source that's cheap, Isabel, cheap. Imagine being able to do this every week," he smeared the white stuff over her neck, "every day."

Isabel moaned.

"Imagine: every night Isabel." He dug more out of the pot, smoothed it between her breasts, down over her stomach. He knelt. Isabel sagged against him as he rubbed more into the pale skin on the inside of her thighs.

Ariel turned away. Her cheek was wet; she let herself drift away from the here and the now.

Whimpering and the sound of retching dragged her back. She turned her head. The red-haired man was crouched on the moss, wiping his mouth.

"Isabel?" he panted, then heaved again. Nothing came up but milky drool. "Isabel?"

He levered himself to his feet, shook her. "Oh, gods."

He swayed, then staggered off into the trees. Ariel listened to his crashing progress fade. She went to her sister.

Isabel lay on her back. Her mouth was stretched open, her feet and hands twisted inward. She was locked in a frozen muscle spasm. The pot, almost empty, nestled by her hip.

"Nuh," she said.

Ariel concentrated on her own breathing, the way her chest filled out and her stomach rounded when she took a particularly deep breath.

"Isabel? *Bel*?"

Isabel's eyes were open. Ariel waved her hand in front of them. Nothing. She picked up the pot, sniffed it, put it in her beltpouch. Light and thunder

cracked across the sky sending shadow flickering across Isabel's face, like a smile. The first raindrop fell on Isabel's thigh and Ariel watched it trickle over the tiny white hairs on the pale skin, then fall onto the moss.
"Nuh," Isabel said again.
"Yes, baby, I know." She picked up the shift, began to untangle it. "I won't let you get wet." The front was moss-stained. "Put your hands in here." She tried to pull Isabel's arm straight, pushed it through the sleeve. "And the other one." She buttoned up the front. "Where are your sandals?"
Rain sheeted down. Ariel could not fit the sandals over her sister's twisted feet, so she took them off and put them carefully down on the moss, side by side. Rain dripped from her nose, her chin. Isabel choked.
"On your side." Ariel pushed her onto her side; rainwater poured from her open mouth and she began to breathe again.
"We've got to get you home, Bel."
Then the storm hit.
Later, she never really knew how she managed to take Isabel under her armpits and haul her upright. Wind punched through the forest roof, beating branches against trunks and leaves against branches; rain plastered the hair to her head and washed over the forest floor, endless as a waterfall. Isabel's heels left two neat tracks in the mud as Ariel dragged her backwards down the path.
There was no other way to get Isabel into the boat than to tumble her in and climb in after. The waterway, swollen by the rain, pulled the boat to the limits of its restraining rope. In the distance, the river roared.
The rope was wet, difficult to handle. She pulled and pushed, pulled again carefully, worrying at it methodically until the knot began to loosen. She unshipped the oars and tugged sharply at the rope.
The river took them in its fist.
High up, the window was open and sunshine dappled the whitewashed walls of the sickroom. A servant stood by the window, fanning the bed. Ariel listened to the trees rustling below. The draught blew a strand of golden hair across her sister's eyes but Isabel did not blink; Ariel leaned over and brushed the hair away. For the first few days after the accident, she had refused to leave Bel's bedside, frightened she would miss some movement, some sign that Bel was waking up, getting better.
"Ari." Michel, her brother, stood by the door. "Dr Gauthier is here."

She stood. "Dr Gauthier."
"Ariel." He nodded to her, then moved to the bedside. He took Isabel's pulse, looked in her eyes, palpated the tendons along her arm.
"Help me turn her over."
He tapped her back and drew his finger along the soles of her feet. There was no response. Using what looked like a wooden horn, he listened to her breathing. He straightened.
"She's getting worse, isn't she?"
"Yes. I'm sorry."
She stared out of the window, listening to the trees. "The olla was contaminated?"
"Yes."
She turned to face him. "What with?"
"Does it matter, child?"
"Doctor, I have not been a child for several years. And it matters very much to me what was in that ointment and where it came from and why."
She looked down at the trees again, did not look up until he left.
Ariel handed the tiny glass vial to the apothecary. The woman unscrewed the top and sniffed.
"Olla milk," she said. She looked at Ariel who was cloaked and hooded, even in the heat. "But that's not all you wanted to know."
"It's contaminated."
"Ah."
"I want to know what with and where the extra ingredients came from."
"This is all you have?"
"Others have tried. That's all that's left. Can you do it?"
"Maybe."
The funeral was held in Quenelles itself. The de Courtivron funeral barge, draped in black with the family crest gleaming dully in the river haze, was followed by others crowded with representatives from all the important families. The town, a jumble of grey stone and wood and red tile, stretched along both sides of the river. On the right bank, its cold blank walls shouldering above the smaller merchants' houses, stood the de Courtivron mansion, where Monsieur de Courtivron would return to the business of trade as soon as was fitting. The river stank.

Ariel stood straight. Her mourning dress was stiff and her hands sweated inside their gloves. She felt cold and numb. She remembered one of the nights, years ago, when Bel had sneaked into her bedroom in the middle of the night and they watched the river, mysterious with lights and its all-night docking and loading, until their feet got cold on the stone floor. Then they jumped into bed top to tail and, while she scared them both to death with a story about dead fishermen rising from the river, rubbed each other's feet warm.

It did not seem like the same river. It would never be the same river.

Again, Ariel went cloaked and hooded. The apothecary was waiting for her.

"Whoever sold you this should be guillotined." She looked grim. "Do you know what it can do?"

Ariel said nothing. She refused to remember Bel lying on the forest floor. The woman motioned for her to sit.

"The olla milk is contaminated with ground carenna pod."

"As in Estalian carenna flour?"

The woman nodded. "Usually, the pods are soaked and dried and soaked and dried over and over to leach out all the poisons before being ground into flour." She tapped the vial. "This was deliberate: olla flowers grow in Araby, the carenna comes from Estalia. And I tell you something else, the carenna was added while it was still fresh. The olla isn't discoloured, which it would be if the pods had been picked more than a few hours before being added to it."

"So the carenna was added in Estalia," Ariel said slowly. She stood up. "Thank you."

Madame de Courtivron raised her goblet of thick, Tilean glass and sipped at the light wine the family always drank with lunch during the summer. Ariel watched a servant fill the glass. Without Isabel at the table, this would be the first time she, Michel and her mother would not need a second bottle opening. She was tempted to drink more than usual, so that another bottle would be needed and the ritual maintained.

"I've not seen much of you these past few days," her mother said.

Ariel finished her mouthful. "No."

"You've been busy, I hear. In Quenelles."

Ariel wondered how word had reached her mother and how much she knew.

"Mother, I need to know what happened."

"We know what happened. Your sister was greedier than usual, only this time she died from it. We know all we need to. Asking questions only means others are finding out about how she died." She put her knife down, reached for a fresh bread roll. "Or is it that you want all the other families in Bretonnia to know what your sister was?"
Ariel went white.
Michel darted a look at his sister, then his mother. "Mother..."
His mother ignored him. "Well, Ariel?"
Ariel leaned back in her chair, wiped her lips with a napkin. "You may be sure," she said distinctly, shaping each word with care, "that any further questions I ask will be discreet." She dropped her napkin on the table. "And now, if you will excuse me."
In her room, Ariel leaned her forehead against the cool plaster. She had to think.
Her brother tapped on her door. "Ari?"
"Go away."
He pushed the door open. "She didn't mean it, Ari."
"She did. We both know that." She strode over to the window. Today there was no breeze to make the trees whisper. "Michel, if you're coming in then come in, don't hover by the door."
Michel sat on the bed.
"I'm going to find out," she said.
"How?"
"That red-haired man might know something. Will you help me?"
Ariel took off her jewellery and bundled up her hair in an old piece of blue serge as she had seen the servants do. The old cotton shift she had stolen from the servants' chest was a little too big. She checked herself in a mirror. The headscarf made her eyes look a deeper, darker blue than usual.
Sunlight bounced off the water, making her squint as she pulled the boat into Quenelles. The red-haired man had told her brother that the contaminated olla had come from a native of the Estalian city of Magritta who called himself Jorge. She was here to find out more. The sixty francs in her pouch should loosen enough tongues, one way or another.
After the bright sunlight, the tavern was dark. The low room smelled of sharp new wine and stale sweat. It was almost empty: most of the customers

were outside, in the courtyard. A man was mopping at a puddle of wine on one of the rough wooden tables.
"M'sieur?"
"Wine's six francs a jug or one franc a cup," he said without looking up.
"No, m'sieur. I don't want wine. I'm looking for someone, a man."
"We already have one girl working here, and she doesn't have much trade. Try the waterfront."
He moved over to another table and began to clean it.
"M'sieur, I'm not looking for work but for a particular man, a Magrittan. Called Jorge."
He straightened. "Jorge? What do you want him for?"
"Do you know him?"
"No." He grinned at his own joke. "Got yourself in trouble by him, eh?"
Ariel looked at the floor and tried to remember how the servants spoke when they wanted something.
"Please, M'sieur, you look like a knowledgeable man." She raised her eyes to his. "If you know where I might find him I would be most grateful." She wondered if her servants ever despised her as much as she did this man.
He considered. "Sailor, is he?"
"Very possibly, m'sieur."
"Well then, do like I first said, try the waterfront." He leered at her. "And if you want to show your gratitude after you've found him, I'm always here."
As she picked her way through the filthy streets to the waterfront, she felt uneasy. Every so often, she glanced over her shoulder but saw nothing.
It was the middle of the day and the waterfront seethed with people: sailors free for a day while one cargo was offloaded and another brought on board; rope menders swearing at those who stood in their light; fish sellers trying to out-shout each other; women buying vegetables.
A woman in the coarse cotton and canvas of a sailor was sitting on the cobbles, leaning against a wall, her eyes closed. Ariel stepped over the woman's carry sack and stood in front of her.
"M'selle."
No response.
"M'selle?" She tapped her on the shoulder.
The sailor exploded off the ground and grabbed both her wrists. Her eyes were bloodshot. She was tall, taller than Ariel.

"Can't you see I was sleeping!" the woman roared in a thick Empire accent.
"Drunk more like," Ariel said. She was surprised that the beating of her heart did not make her voice wobble. "Let go of my arms."
"And if I don't?"
"Then I will break your legs."
The woman's face went stiff as a mask. Her hard brown hands tightened on Ariel's wrists, then let go.
"Be careful who you make such threats to." She bent to pick up her sack.
"No, wait."
The sailor turned around, hand on hip, sack slung over her shoulder.
"I'm... sorry I woke you. I need to know if you know where I can find a Magrittan called Jorge."
"What do you want Jorge for?" She looked wary.
"Do you know him?" Ariel waited for her to laugh and say no, like the man in the tavern.
"I might. Tell me why you want him first."
"I can't."
"Then I can't tell you, either." She turned and began walking.
"Wait!" It rang out cold and arrogant. One or two heads turned but the sailor kept on walking. Ariel cursed under her breath and ran after her. "I mean, please, wait. My sister used some contaminated olla. She died." The woman slowed. "I think the olla came from Jorge."
The sailor stopped and looked up and down the street. "Come in here," she said abruptly, and pulled Ariel into a tavern.
"I knew he wasn't on the voyage for the sake of it," she said to Ariel over a cup of rough red wine, "I told Helseher. But no," she gulped thirstily at her cup, waved it in the air until a wineboy filled it, "Kapitan Helseher says to me, 'it doesn't matter what else he's up to, Marya, he's a good sailor and he'll do while Franz is sick in Brionne.' And now he's gone."
"Gone? Where?"
Marya shrugged. "Back down the river. All the way to Magritta maybe. Who knows."
Ariel tried to think past her disappointment. "I don't suppose you knew his real name?" She sipped at her wine, put it aside with a grimace.
"Well now, you suppose wrong. Here. No sense wasting good wine." She reached for Ariel's cup, tipped its contents into her own. "Jorge was his

name all right."
"You're sure?"
"Ought to be. I took a look at his papers one day while he was on deck. No doubt he thought they were well hidden. According to the papers he was, or is, Jorge Martinez Castelltort, Officer of the Fleet no less, under Admiral Escribano himself."
Ariel wondered how this woman had learned to read. Instead, she asked: "What would a Captain of the Magrittan fleet be doing posing as a sailor and selling poisoned olla?"
Marya shrugged, had another drink.
"It doesn't make sense," Ariel persisted.
"Doesn't seem to, does it?" Marya waved her cup again. "The *Rosamund* sails in four hours and I need more to drink. Won't get the chance again till Brionne."
"But it takes days to get to Brionne. Won't you be stopping along the way?"
"Weeks," Marya corrected carefully, "Three weeks in the *Rosamund*. Fine ship. If we do stop, it'll be work work work, no fun."
The wine boy came over. Marya paid for two jugs of wine.
"Maybe you should get yourself closer to where the *Rosamund* is berthed before you drink yourself senseless." "Not far. On this bank, five minutes walk. Can do that even after twice as much as this." She picked up her cup, poured, reached for Ariel's. "Stay for a cup or two."
The five minutes walk turned out to be nearer fifteen. Once, Ariel was sure someone was following her but the dockside was crowded and she could have been mistaken. A high-sided, three-masted ship stood at anchor. The *Rosamund*.
Two men were fastening hatches.
"Captain Helseher?" she called up.
One of them peered down at her. "He's busy. We sail in half an hour."
"It's important. Mademoiselle Marya is unconscious in a tavern."

He laughed. "It's the first time I've heard her called M'selle."
"But it's not the first time she's been senseless in a tavern, eh Rudi?" the other said. "Tell us where, girl, and we'll bring her on board."
"No. I want to speak to Captain Helseher."
A small, round man with greying hair came on deck. "I'm Helseher."
"I need to speak to you. About passage to Brionne."
"We don't carry passengers. Not normally." He squinted down. "But I'll take you for two hundred francs."
"I only have sixty here. I can get the rest if you wait."
"We sail in half an hour. With or without you."
"Would you take me as crew?"
Rudi laughed. Irritably, Helseher waved him to silence. "Don't waste my time, girl."
"But I hear you're one short. And I can sail, climb, tie knots, row."
"Wait there."
For someone so round, Helseher made easy work of swinging himself down the rope ladder to shore. "You ever sail anything this size before?"
"No. I could learn."
"Um. You drink?" "No, except with dinner." Helseher raised an eyebrow. "That is, I mean..."
"I know exactly what you mean. You're hired. It'll take you two weeks to learn the ropes, so all you'll get is food, three cups of wine a day and passage to Brionne in exchange for working so hard you'll wish you'd never been born. Acceptable? Good. Now, where's Marya?"
Marya was heavier than she looked.
"Help me get her up."
The way Marya flopped reminded Ariel of dragging Bel out of the forest.
"I said help me, dammit."
Ariel jerked at Marya.
"Careful. She's not a sack of turnips."
"Sorry."
Between them, they trundled Marya through the door.
"Wa... happening?"
"You're drunk again and it's time to sail. We..." He looked at Ariel. "What's your name, girl?"
"Ariel."

"...Ariel and I are lugging your pickled carcass to the *Rosamund*. So keep quiet and move your legs."

Marya stopped abruptly, leaned forward and threw up.

"Hold her steady."

Ariel did as she was told while the captain pulled a square of white cotton from his pocket and wiped at Marya's mouth. "No one should have to walk through the streets with vomit on their face."

A crowd coming out of another tavern jeered as they passed. Helseher ignored them.

Ariel's arms were aching with the strain by the time they reached the *Rosamund*.

"Here." They eased her down onto the stones. "You go aboard. Tell them to let down the cradle. She'll never make it up the ladder like this."

By the time Ariel scrambled to the top of the ladder, Rudi and Hugner were already unshipping the cradle. Ariel looked down at the dock. From the height of the raised foredeck, everything looked different: she could see Helseher holding Marya's hand and talking quietly; over there, behind one of the netting sheds, a boy was relieving himself into the river and, closer to the ship, a man wearing a woollen cap was... Ariel frowned and leaned as far over the rail as she dared: he was nowhere in sight. He must have dodged behind that stack of barrels.

"Let's get out of here," Helseher shouted once everyone was aboard. He turned to Ariel. "You, in my cabin."

"But what about Marya?"

"Uti knows what to do."

She followed the captain below.

"Now tell me," Helseher said when they were in his cabin, "why has a woman been following you?"

"A woman?"

"Yes," he said irritably, "all the way from the tavern."

Ariel pondered that. A woman. But it had been a man she saw earlier.

Helseher gave her a long look. "I'll get to the bottom of this when there's time. For now, get yourself on deck and do what Jean-Luc tells you."

The captain turned to the charts on his table and Ariel realized she had been dismissed. It was something she would have to get used to.

The *Rosamund* moved slowly into midstream, tacking around smaller fishing craft and the occasional rowing boat. Ariel watched Quenelles and all that was familiar to her slip away in their wake. Above her, a sail snapped as it caught the wind. For the next three weeks, this would be her world.

Jean-Luc turned out to be the first mate, a small-boned man who was slightly balding and never spoke more loudly than he had to. He set Ariel to coiling ropes - thick as her arm and rough as freshly sawn wood - and stowing them in lockers. She was surprised at how cramped everything was; the *Rosamund* had looked to be such a big ship. She asked Jean-Luc about it.

"The *Rosamund* is an ocean-going vessel. Not a river boat. We've sailed her through the South Sea, the Black Gulf, even across the Middle Sea as far north as Albion."

"Don't let him get on to the subject of Albion," said a rough Empire voice behind her. "He hates everything about that island. Especially the people."

Ariel turned. "Shouldn't you be sleeping it off?"

Marya shook her head. "With something to do I'll be sober before we've gone another league."

"So take her below and show her her berth," Jean-Luc said. "Then bring her back up here and show her the ropes." He looked at Ariel. "I'll assign you to a watch tomorrow. Make sure you know what you're doing by then."

Marya laughed and took her below.

"Here."

It was dark and cramped. She was supposed to sleep between what looked like the ribs of the ship.

"Everyone sleeps here except Helseher, Jean-Luc and Gerber, the cook."

Ariel counted the bundles of clothes. There were four. "Only seven of us for a ship this size?"
"Eight. There's you, too. We'll find you a bit of sailcloth to pad out your bunk, otherwise you'll bruise when we hit weather. Not that we're likely to have any weather to speak of on a journey like this. And eight is plenty for a river run."
Ariel heard the bitterness. "Marya, if this is an ocean-going ship, why isn't it at sea?"
"It's not profitable to follow the old trade routes any more, we get taxed out of existence by people like Jorge and his friends. The Magrittans."
"But what right do they have?"
"The oldest one in the world. Might." She reached for one of the bundles of clothes and pulled out a map. She traced the outline of the Horn of Araby. There was dirt under her fingernail. "Anyone wanting to move goods from here to anywhere past the Estalian coast - Bretonnia, Marienburg, Erengrad, anywhere - has to pass here." She tapped the southern tip of Estalia. "And that's where the Magrittan fleet has been manoeuvring for the past four or five months. Nothing gets through without paying taxes. They even dared tax an Elven ship that stopped over on the horn on its way from Lustria."
Ariel absorbed the information: the resources they would need to seal off the whole of that coastal route must be enormous. How did they sustain it?
"The Magrittans have gone crazy."
"That might literally be true. I've heard..." Marya stopped, and her forehead tightened. Ariel could not decide whether from fear or hatred.
"What?"
"Nothing you need to know, girl."
Ariel waited. It was plain that Marya wanted to tell her.
The sailor stared at the bulkhead. "Escribano has allied himself to a Power."
Her mouth stretched in an attempt at a smile. Ariel was not sure that she had heard right. "Cat got your tongue?"
"Which..." Ariel cleared her throat. "Which one?"
"The Blood God."
Khorne. The Destroyer. And Escribano had allied himself to this Chaos Power. Deliberately, she let her grief overwhelm her fear: Escribano had at least one more death to offer his God. That was what she had to think about.

She looked at the map again, trying to understand the enormity of the Magrittan's corporeal influence.
"Why didn't I know about all this?"
Marya shrugged. "People tend to know only what affects them. When the price of Tilean glass goes up or you can't get your Cathay silks any more because nobody'll risk that journey only to have their profits taxed to nothing, then you'd know about it."

Ariel wondered if her father knew all this. Not yet. Most of the family business was centred around river trade. It occurred to her that the *Rosamund* might be carrying de Courtivron goods.

"What are we carrying?"
"I'll show you in a minute." She stowed the map in her bundle, pulled something else out, She weighed it in her hands a moment then held it towards Ariel. It was a knife. The handle was plain wood, well polished. The blade was twice the length of her hand. "Might be useful."
Ariel accepted it silently.
"There's a loop on the sheath. Put it on your belt."
Ariel did, settling it comfortably on her right hip. Marya nodded. "I'll take you to the hold."
To Ariel's unpractised eye, the cargo seemed haphazardly arranged. Huge crates were stowed forward of smaller cases, while timber obviously from the same lumber merchant lay stacked in different piles. One corner of the hold was full of empty trays stacked one atop the other.
Marya patted them. "These are for the Cixous paté. Captain Helseher will work us half to death getting it to Laguiller. Paté doesn't last too long away from ice. The fresher it is when we get it there, the more it'll sell for. And for that cargo, we get a percentage of the profit."
"We?"
"Helseher. But if he doesn't make much then it's one less hired next voyage. But there's no real worry this time, it's downstream all the way. Means we can take the short route through white water. On the way up we carried Cixous paté to Quenelles. Upstream. We had to come through the slow curve of the river. Helseher nearly had us in the boat, towing."
"How many stops are we making?"

"Eight. Cixous, then Brusse, then through the gorge to Laguiller. After that it's Aubenas, Muret, Ferignac, Sibourne and Brionne."
"Then back to Quenelles?"
"If we must." Marya shrugged. "Let's find you some proper clothes, then I'll take you on deck."

The *Rosamund* nosed its way into Cixous past floating pieces of dead fish and old netting. It smelled worse than Quenelles. Jean-Luc and Gerber the cook had taken the boat and rowed into harbour earlier to arrange for their onward cargo to be waiting when they docked. Ariel stood on deck, holding the bundle of rope ladder ready. The muscles in her shoulders and back burned with the strain of hauling her own weight up and down the masts. Her face was red and peeling. Sweat ran down her arms and soaked through the strips of cloth wound around her hands. Her raw palms began to itch.

The anchor rattled and she threw the bundle over the side. It unwound with a wooden clacking and bumped gently against the side. Marya and the thick-armed Rudi took one rope, Hugner and Uti the other as they swung the cradle into position and began lowering it. Helseher paced. The stacked lumber shifted slightly. Uti cursed and staggered.
"Ariel, you're the lightest." Helseher gestured at the cradle. "Get that wood balanced."
Ariel used Rudi as a mounting block, fitting her bare feet first on his bunched thigh, then his shoulder. The hilt of her knife dug into her side. She gritted her teeth as she pulled herself up by her hands. Marya grunted with the strain of the extra weight. She worked quickly, efficiently, then let herself down by her hands, not letting go until she was sure her weight was firm on the deck and would not set the cradle swinging again. Hugner managed a brief nod of approval.
"Well done, girl," Helseher muttered. He leaned over the side, looking down at the cobbles. There was no sign of Jean-Luc. "Where in the name of the gods is he?" He wiped his forehead. "Damn this heat."
The cradle reached the dock safely. Ariel climbed down the ladder with the others to help unload. She found that if she swore very softly under her

breath as she and Marya stacked plank after plank, she did not notice the pain in her hands so much.
The owners of the timber were already supervising its removal when Jean-Luc and Gerber arrived on an ox cart driven by a patient young woman. Jean-Luc scrambled down and strode over to Helseher, where he started talking in a quiet voice. Ariel helped the driver unlace the leather sheet covering her wagon. Jean-Luc paused and Helseher looked over at Ariel for a moment, then turned back to his first mate. Ariel wondered what they were talking about.

"Girl!" Helseher's voice was sharp. "Get back on the *Rosamund* and go below."

Ariel blinked, uncertain.
"Hurry it up. I want Gerber to take a look at your hands. And stay below out of the sun, hear? I don't want you getting feverish in this heat."
Ariel did as she was told, wondering.
She was sitting on her bundle of clothes, her hands freshly bandaged and still stinging from Gerber's attentions, when she felt the anchor come up. A few minutes later, Marya put her head through the hatch.
"Helseher wants you." She withdrew, then put her head back through. "That story you told me about your sister. Was it true?"
Ariel nodded.
"Well, that's something."
Helseher's cabin was crowded with the captain, Jean-Luc and Marya. They were all standing.
"I don't want this to take too long, girl. We've a ship to get to Laguiller and a cargo to sell. But I want the truth from you and I want it now. Marya here tells me you've been asking questions about a man I hired to Quenelles, that he's mixed up somehow in your sister's death."
"I have reason to believe that he sold some deliberately contaminated olla to a man who gave it to my sister. She died as a result."
"And?"
"And now I'm trying to find Jorge and ask why. If I can't find him then I'll go to Magritta and find someone who can tell me."
"Magritta. That's interesting. Perhaps that explains why Magrittans have been asking about you all over Cixous."

Ariel could find nothing to say.

Jean-Luc cleared his throat. "The paté seller told me that a Magrittan woman who made port earlier in the day has been asking around to see if the *Rosamund* had docked and if one woman in particular - tall, pale, long blonde hair, icy eyes - had been seen. Apparently she was most anxious, offered the paté seller a great deal of money for information and to keep his silence. He told me anyhow. Doesn't like Magrittans, he said."

Helseher nodded then gestured for Marya to speak.

"When I was in the tavern, the innkeeper told me a story: last night a strange man, very tall, very thin, was asking questions about the crew of the *Rosamund* and what our ports of call were likely to be. According to the innkeeper, the man wasn't Magrittan."

Helseher turned to Ariel. "I want to know what they want of you and why, and whether they're likely to harm the *Rosamund*."

"I don't know." She laid her hand on her knife.

"Is it your family?"

"No. They wouldn't do it like this."

"So who?" Helseher sat behind a table and tapped at a chart in irritation. "I don't like this sneaking about."

"Nor does the girl, Captain," Marya said softly, nodding at Ariel's hand on the knife. With an effort, Ariel put her hands behind her back.

Helseher stood up abruptly.

"From now on, when we come to a port, stay below. It won't do you any harm to keep out of sight."

Ariel's hands healed; she had to strap them only for the roughest work; her face and arms were no longer red and peeling and her legs, bare below her knees, were lean and brown. Without sandals, her feet hardened. She had proved to the rest of the crew that she was quick and reliable and that if she

was unfamiliar with a knot or a method of splicing, she needed to be shown only once. Out on the river she drank the rough red wine with her meals like everyone else. Several days out of Cixous she had taken to wearing a cap to cover her silver-gold hair; she no longer ducked out of sight everytime the *Rosamund* tacked past a river boat or was overtaken by some sleek dinghy. The knife at her hip was just another eating implement.

Ariel was lying between the ribs of the ship, her head propped on the small bundle made of the clothes she had first come aboard in. It was hot. The others were either unloading on the docks or in the waterfront's two taverns, finding out if anyone had been asking questions about the *Rosamund* or about Ariel.

Time dragged. The ship rocked slightly at anchor; the lamp hanging from the beam above her swung from side to side. She stretched, imagining that she was lying on the sloping grass of the river bank, drying off in the sun. During the summer when she was twelve and Bel ten, they were always by the river playing with the local children. What was the game they had perfected that summer? It had no name: the only rule was to throw someone in the river, then they had to help you throw someone else in. The trick was to sweep the victim's legs out from under them while at the same time clapping your hand over their mouth and nose to stop them yelling to alert the others, then both jump in together. It had the added bonus of stopping the victim swallowing water as they plunged headfirst. Between them, she and Bel had raised the game to an art.

She fell asleep with tears running down her cheeks.

When she woke an hour later, her tears had dried leaving her face drawn and tight. She heard the hatch swing open. It did not bang; whoever had opened it was trying hard not to be heard. She eased her knife from her sheath and stood up. A step creaked: someone was coming down the stairs.

He had to duck to get through the doorway. It was the same man she had seen on the wharf at Quenelles: she recognized the cap pulled low over his ears. He was as slender as a dart.

They looked at each other. Ariel stood poised, knife drawn; the man was relaxed, still, with no weapon that she could see.
"Who are you?"
"Mademoiselle de Courtivron, I have no intention of harming you in any way. I have come to give you a warning."
She lifted the knife. "Out." Her voice was thick and tight.
"I could have that breadknife away from you and at your own throat without breaking into a sweat."
All her fear, all the uncertainty and grief of the last weeks, coalesced around a point in the middle of his breastbone. She went for him.
She dived into a roll and came to her feet under his chin, her knife striking up like a snake. It surprised him: she got close enough to see the empty earring holes in his lobes before he moved faster than she thought possible to take the knife point across his shoulder. Then, she did not know how, he had the knife at her throat and her arms pinned behind her. His body felt odd: padded in strange places. Blood, his blood, dripped on her wrists.
"You scratched me. No-one's done that in years," he said softly.
"Let me go."
"Not until you listen. I want you to leave the *Rosamund*.Go back upriver, go home, go anywhere. Don't stay on this ship and don't ask any more questions."
Ariel noticed that his hands were very long and slim, and calloused in the wrong places.
"Why?"
"Because you're ruining months of work with your blundering. You're alerting dangerous people. When they've killed you they'll start asking questions of their own. They might find out that other people have been interested in them for a long time. You don't know what you're dealing with."
"Let me go."
He did. She backed off, hands spread. He laughed but it was flat, like his eyes. He threw her the knife. She sheathed it.
"They killed my sister. I want to know why."
"This is about much more than the death of a young woman."

"Not to me."
"Go home before you learn too much. Or they will kill you."
"Who? Capitano Jorge Martinez Castelltort-in-disguise, or Admiral Escribano himself?" Her voice was sharp.
His face flattened into something alien. "Perhaps it is already too late for you," he said softly. Then he was gone.
When Helseher returned, Ariel went to his cabin and told him about their visitor.
"Do you think I should go back home?"
"Yes, but I'm not going to try and persuade you: you're too useful to me as crew."
"Thank you."
"I'm not sure I'm doing you a favour."
Half a day downstream from Brusse, the Brienne was joined by the fast flowing Sirthelle tributary. Where the two rivers met, their churning waters had carved out a gorge two miles long with granite cliffs a hundred yards high in places. As they approached the gorge, Helseher took the wheel himself.
Ariel worked a capstan with Uti on the starboard side. They were sweating. The ship hit white water and lurched. Spray arced over the bow and drenched Ariel. She grinned at Uti: the water was deliciously cold.
"Brace yourselves."
The *Rosamund*, and a skiff also taking the white water short cut, bucked and slid into the gorge. Helseher spun the wheel this way and that, then hauled it right over. With most of the canvas furled they were relying on the current. It made steering difficult.
They were thrown into the deep shadow cast by the cliffs to starboard where the thunder of water echoed and re-echoed from the granite.
"It's calmer when we get past the bend!" Uti shouted through the roar.
The bend loomed ahead: a curve to port so sharp that it looked like a dead end. Rocks, black and slick, reared through the foam. Ariel shivered. Helseher spun the wheel clockwise, held it, spun it counterclockwise and

they headed straight for the biggest rock in the river. At what seemed like the last minute to Ariel, Helseher moved the wheel a fraction and the *Rosamund* slipped sweetly through. They glided into calm open water; sunlight glistened on the taffrail and Ariel's wet hair.

"Raise sail," Helseher called to nobody in particular. He sounded pleased with himself. He squinted at the sun. "If we get that paté to Laguiller before first light tomorrow, five hours shore leave for everyone."

Ariel scrambled for the rigging along with Rudi and Marya.

Below, the river looked beautiful: sandbars covered in stands of white-plumed cane jutted out from the bank and in the small lateral channels thickets of oak crowded behind willows whose leaves swept the water with their fingertips. Behind them, the skiff had come through unharmed.

"Why before first light?" she called across the yard arm to Marya. She swayed as she edged along the rope.

"The market starts first thing. Paté always fetches a better price if the buyers have seen it being unloaded from the hold an hour before."

"But we could have been lying at anchor for hours, days even."

"Doesn't matter. If they think it's fresh, they pay more." She laughed.

Ariel wondered if her brother or father ever paid too much for a cargo. And suddenly she missed them, missed her room with its cool white linens, missed the whisper of trees outside her window. She smiled to herself, hearing the whisper of those trees...

But it was not trees. It was the splash of six pairs of oars as two boats swung out from opposite side channels towards them, it was the soft buzz of arrow fletching cutting the air. Ariel watched, fascinated, as an arrow caught the sunlight on its downward spiral towards Helseher.

"Captain!" Marya, already halfway down the rigging, jumped the rest, knocking Helseher to the deck. The arrow thunked into the wheel, still humming. Then the air was full of them.

The archers were on the left bank; Ariel could see them clearly as they nocked, drew, released and nocked again. She kept the mast between her and them as she shinned her way down. The skiff behind them raised sail, chopping through the water towards them. While it was still four hundred yards astern, a tall, thin figure stood in the bow and raised a bow of his

own. Ariel heard each arrow he loosed at the archers on the bank: a deeper, stronger sound. More deadly, like his aim. He killed three in the time it took Ariel to draw as many breaths. The archers retreated.

The first boat drew alongside their starboard bow. Two of the six stayed sitting; the others shipped their oars. A grapple thumped onto the planking and snaked back, gripping the rail. Ariel half fell and half jumped the rest of the way down; without standing upright, she scrambled across the deck like a four-legged spider. She hacked at the rope. Everything slowed down; even the smallest movement took forever; while she hacked and sawed, a man leapt for the rail. Then he was clambering aboard and everything clicked back into real time. Ariel howled and lunged at him, stabbing without science or method. She stabbed him in the face, the neck. Blood, hot and bright, arced through the air, spattering her mouth and hair. The man screamed and screamed and Ariel stabbed him again. He would not die. His screams went on and on. She heard the grinding thump of the second boat coming alongside, Helseher bellowing, Marya singing of all things and the hatch banging as Gerber and Jean-Luc charged onto the deck armed with a meat cleaver and boat-hook - but she was crazy with revulsion for the blood clinging thick and sticky to her hair and clothes, insane with the need to rid the ship of people so she could wash herself clean again. She attacked mindlessly. A man facing her dropped with an arrow in his hip; she slashed at him anyway.

On the other side of the deck, a man lifted his short sword at Gerber but fell gurgling with an arrow in his throat. A woman hacked at Rudi, had time to swing a second time before she groaned and fell, a purple-fletched arrow in her back.

Now the attackers were outnumbered. They leapt over the rails for their boats. One missed and thrashed in the water until the stranger's arrows found him. The skiff altered course to chase the boats down. The bow hummed again and again. Soon, the *Rosamund* was the only thing in sight on the river.

"Ariel."

Ariel turned with bared teeth.

"Ariel," Marya said again. "It's over. Put down your knife."
Ariel blinked, looked around. Several bodies lay tumbled over the stained planking; Helseher leaned against the mainmast, holding his arm and groaning; Hugner was sitting on the chest of a man who was bleeding heavily; Gerber was being sick over the side; Jean-Luc had the wheel; Uti was checking bodies. Rudi was dead.
Her knife was clotted with blood. She dropped it.
"Are you hurt?"
"Hurt?" She looked up from her knife to Marya. "No." She took a deep breath, then another.
"You're bleeding."
"It's not mine."
"No, here. Look."
Ariel looked. Just below her left breast blood seeped through a slash in her shirt. She felt nothing.
"Let me see."
Ariel raised her arm obediently to let her unlace the shirt.
The cut was six inches long and deep enough to gape, showing pinkish bone. She swayed.
"Easy. Here, sit down." Marya lowered her to the deck.
"Why doesn't it hurt?"
"It will." She eased the shirt off and wadded it up. She pressed it against the wound. "Hold it on." She guided Ariel's hand to the makeshift pressure bandage then stood up and went to where Hugner sat on his prisoner.
"Let him up, Hugner."
He lifted his tear-stained face to hers. "They killed Rudi."
"I know. Let him up."
"He might kill someone else."
"He's dying, Uti. Look at the blood." It was pooling underneath the prisoner. "And we need you."
He hesitated, then climbed off. Marya laid a hand on his shoulder.
"Thank you. We need this deck clearing. Push them overboard, we haven't time for niceties. Not Rudi," she added. "Uti" - he straightened - "you and I have to finish setting some sail. We need to get moving. They might be back." She crossed the deck to where the cook was still heaving dryly.

"Gerber," she said gently, "there's nothing left in your stomach and Ariel and the captain both need attention. Can you see to it?" He nodded.
"See to Ariel first," Helseher said, pushing himself upright from the mast. He had some of his colour back. "It's only a broken bone." He glared at Marya.
"Better than a hole in your head," Marya said, swinging herself up the rigging.
Ariel was cold. A great deep ache began to build in her ribs. She felt sick.
"Marya?" she said. "Marya?" And fainted.
She insisted on coming on deck for Rudi's funeral. Helseher, with his arm splinted and strapped across his chest, spoke the ritual to Manann, god of the sea, in Reikspiel, the sailor's native dialect. A stiff breeze made the ropes thrum. When the captain nodded at Marya, Ariel was startled to hear the sunburned sailor offered tribute to Morr, god of death, in classical Old Worlder. She spoke of Rudi's strength, his good humour, his willingness to help anyone when he could. Her words were soothing and peaceful.
Rudi's body, wrapped with a chain, sank with a splash. They were silent for a while.
"Let's not waste this breeze." Helseher said. "Rudi would have liked us to get this cargo to market and make enough money to drink to him in style."
Ariel went below again. In the galley, she found a pair of shears.
Gerber found her five minutes later. "Sweet gods! What have you done?"
She looked up from the pile of shining hair lying around her ankles.
"It had blood on it."
They got to Laguiller in time for the market, though they were so late that they had no time to unload; Jean-Luc had to persuade the buyers to examine the cargo in the hold.
They went to a tavern and drank to Rudi. Ariel drank more than she should have, but the wine would not lessen the numbness deep inside. The others were talking about the stranger in the skiff. "Why'd he go, anyway?" Hugner demanded. He was drunk. "Only the gods know that," Jean-Luc said. "But why'd he help us then run away?" "I don't know, my friend," Marya said. "But I'll tell you this: that was an Elven bow he was using. I've heard the sound those arrows make before now."
Helseher's temper got worse as his arm itched inside its splints; Ariel's wound began to heal and she was strong enough to help Gerber in the

galley so he could take the wheel now and again, freeing Jean-Luc to do her share of work topside.

The nights were quiet: now and again Uti or Hugner would stop mid-laugh, remembering how often Rudi's laugh had sounded. Ariel dreamed; again and again she pushed her knife into the man's neck and watched that impossible streak of blood arcing through the air.

She woke up sweating and went up on deck for cooler air. One moon was half full, the other only a sliver in the sky. Marya was steering.

"Here." Marya handed her a bottle. "It helps, sometimes." "Does it?" "Your choice."

Ariel lifted the bottle and drank. "I should leave this ship now." She handed the rum back.

"Can't. We need you till we get to Brionne and can hire someone else." She looked out across the water for a while. "Ariel, they won't attack the *Rosamund* again." "How do you know?"

"It's you they want. Helseher told me. They'll wait until you're alone. Easier for them that way. You'd be safe if you stayed with us until we got back to Quenelles." She handed over the bottle. "Ever been up the coast to Bordelaux? Worth seeing. Take us a week to get there from Brionne, a day to load the wine, week to get back to Brionne and sell it. Three weeks after that you can be back in Quenelles. With your family."

"Bel won't be there."

She sighed. "Let go, Ariel."

"I can't." She was silent for a while. "Marya, there's nothing for me in Quenelles. Unless I want to get married."

Moonlight glinted on the upraised bottle. "What will you do when we reach Brionne?"

"I don't know yet. Ask more questions."

"And get yourself killed. Lots of people get killed in Brionne."

"Any better ideas?"

"Stay with the *Rosamunds*."

Ariel shook her head.

"Why not? You're good crew. And the Magrittans won't be able to strangle the life out of trade forever. Some day soon we'll be able to sail to Araby

again, or right across the Great Western Ocean. I've always had a mind to see the New World."
Ariel stayed on deck until the stars began to fade, drinking rum and listening to stories of Lustrian treasure.

The *Rosamund* lay in Brionne harbour. The last of the cargo for Bordelaux was secured in the hold; they would be sailing in four hours. Ariel stood in Helseher's cabin.

"And you're sure you don't want to reconsider my offer?"
"I need to find out about my sister."
The captain sighed, tried to scratch inside the splint on his arm. "Marya was right." He opened a drawer, pulled out a pouch. "Here."
It clinked.
"If you still insist on following Jorge all the way to Magritta, there's enough in there, Empire coin, to buy you passage as far as Bilbali. How you manage from there is up to you. Well, pick it up," he said irritably. "You earned it." "But you said..."
"Didn't think you'd be much use, then. But you learn fast, girl. And Rudi won't be needing his share. Take it." Ariel picked it up. It was heavy. "Thank you." Helseher nodded. Halfway through the door, Ariel paused. "Where will I find Marya?" "Try the tavern nearest the Elven quarter."
Like everything in Brionne, the tavern was huge, overcrowded and noisy. Even though it was officially outside the area populated and run by trading elves, the owner had made an attempt to attract their lucrative custom: the musician in the corner was playing the light, lilting airs preferred by that race and Lustrian wine was available, at a price.
Marya was at a table by herself with a jug and two cups. She was sober.
"Thought you'd find me to say goodbye. Still going ahead with this nonsense?" Ariel nodded. "In that case, I've got news. Jorge came through here a week or more ago. He's gone. Probably to Magritta." Ariel nodded again. That much she had expected. "Also, I've found someone who'll take you as crew as far as Bilbali." She leaned over and tapped the money pouch at Ariel's belt. "That way, you can save your money to buy passage from Bilbali to Magritta."

Ariel did not know what to say. She reached across the table and poured wine for them both. It was sparkling yellow white: Lustrian.

Marya walked her to the *Genevieve*."Fornan, her master, runs a tight ship, everything just so. Not like Helseher. I told him you were an experienced hand. Don't let me down. And don't ask any questions, just keep that pouch out of sight and your knife handy."

Ariel touched the knife, remembered their talk of Escribano, and Khorne the Blood God. She reached out and took the sailor's hand. "Goodbye, Marya."

"Until we meet again. Something tells me we will."

On the fifth day at sea, when she was stripping off her sodden shirt to wash it as best she could in a bucket of scummy water, one of the crew saw the newly healed scar across her ribs.

"Who came off worst?"

She paused, remembering the blood, the way he had screamed. "He died."

After that, the crew left her alone. She began to brood. In her nightmares, the figure who spurted blood under her knife was Bel. She would wake and think of Bel laughing and shuddering with pleasure as the olla seeped into her bloodstream. She could have stopped her, if she had not been olla-dreaming herself.

If Captain Fornan had allowed rum on his ship, she would have drunk herself insensible during the hot lonely hours of the night. Instead, she thought about the stranger. Then she thought about Jorge, and fingered her knife.

On a moonless night almost three weeks after leaving Brionne, Fornan gave the order to heave to. All lights were extinguished. Without the hiss and sputter of lamps or the flap of sail, the toll of Bilbali's great bronze bell rolled clearly across the water.

A light blinked in the distance. Fornan, using a shuttered lamp, answered. He gave a few low-voiced orders and there was a bustle of activity. The bell tolled again. As the sound died away, Ariel heard the splash of oars. A boat bumped alongside and the crew started loading it with small casks and bolts of cloth until it rode low in the water.

Fornan whispered to the men below, then motioned Ariel over.

"There's room on that boat for you. They'll be landing three or four miles north of Bilbali. You can walk the rest of the way. Watch your step when you get there - the Bilbalis don't like private vengeance. Or private enterprise." His teeth gleamed white in the darkness.

She let herself down the ladder, hand over hand. The shadowy figures in the boat nodded to her as she crouched against the gunwale. It was so dark she could not tell if they were women or men. But they could not see her either.

They came ashore on a rocky beach.

"Bilbali," one of them said in a heavy Estalian accent, and pointed south and west.

"Thank you."

As she picked her way up the cliff side the lap and foam of waves breaking against the beach grew fainter. It felt strange to be wearing sandals again. At the top of the cliff she stopped and breathed deep. The grass was springy under her feet and the air was sweet with rock rose. She looked down at the sea, then inland towards Bilbali. With nothing except her knife and her money pouch, tucked inside her shirt out of sight, she started walking.

The outskirts of the city were closed and dark. In the flat light of dawn, the smell of the Estalian limegrass which hung in baskets outside many of the shuttered houses cut sharp and green through the dust. Ariel took her sandals off; she did not want to be heard and stared at at this hour. With her cropped hair and sailors' clothes, she doubted she would be taken for a servant hurrying through the street on some errand.

The streets narrowed and the smell of limegrass and dust was replaced by humanity and all its filth. After so long at sea, the stench made Ariel feel ill. She put her sandals back on and picked her way through the sewage and refuse. Here, people were awake and moving.

The smell of rotting fish led her to the wharf where the calls of fish sellers screeched through the air like bright, exotic birds. Feeling pale and insubstantial next to the dark-haired and colourfully clothed Bilbalis, she stood in the middle of the noise and bustle, battered by their harsh and unintelligible cries.

She began to tremble: long slow shudders as though someone had hold of her ribs and was shaking her. Her hands and feet went cold and her heart began to thump up against her ribcage so hard she felt she might fly apart. She was alone. There was nowhere to hide.

"You're sick?"
A middle-aged woman with a sun-wrinkled face peered at her from behind her stall.
"I don't know. I..."
"Well, move out of the way. You're blocking my stall."
Ariel stood there, shaking.
"Move. You think people will buy my fish if some sick foreigner is breathing all over them?" She came out from behind her stall. "Go on, move." Several people were looking. The woman raised her voice, enjoying the attention. "You foreigners think you can get away with anything. Well, things are changing around here." She nodded towards the waterfront where two huge ships lay moored. "And the Magrittans will be sending more soon enough. They're making the water safe from pirates like you." A murmur went round the crowd. "And then you won't be striding around here like lordlings."
"And the cost of fish will come down!" shouted someone from the crowd.
"And wheat," shrilled another.
To stop them shaking, Ariel hooked one hand in her belt, laid the other on her knife.
"I am not a pirate. I'm looking for a particular man. His name..." Her voice caught. She took a deep breath and said firmly, "his name is Capitano Jorge Martinez Castelltort."
Someone threw a cabbage. It hit her arm and she stepped back. The crowd stepped forward. She looked around, searching for an escape route.
From behind the crowd came the jingle of armed soldiers trotting on the double. Several of the crowd turned. Ariel ran, pushing aside bystanders, using her elbows where necessary. One of them caught her on the side of her jaw with a wild punch. She did not stop. Behind her she heard the crowd shouting to the soldiers:
" - and she said she was here for Capitano Castelltort."
" - drew her knife, she did."
" - said she was going to kill him."
" - ran off that way."
She tried to think as she ran, but the streets grew more and more narrow and the sounds of pursuit increased behind her. She ran round a corner into an alley of top-heavy houses, and cursed. The end was a blank wall. She ran to

it and leaped. She was too tired: it was too high even to get a fingertip over the top. She tried the nearest house door. Locked. And the next. The shouting was getting louder. Desperate, she ran to the next door.
The figure in the doorway clapped one hand over her mouth and the other around her waist, pinning her arms. Two soldiers trotted into the alley.
"Don't struggle," he whispered, "unless you want them to catch you."
The hand over her mouth was long and calloused; she did not struggle. A cloak of cold air dropped over her shoulders and something flickered and surged past her. The two soldiers stopped mid-stride, turned, and left the alley. Refusing to think about what had just happened, she allowed herself to be pulled back into the house.
"Lock the door."
She turned the key, then took it out of the door and tucked it inside her shirt. Across the room, the strange man was running his hands over a blank wall. With a click, it opened. Ariel followed him through a brick-lined passage. They came out into a garden warmed by early morning sun. From somewhere inside the high walls a bird sang.
"Where are we?"
"The elf quarter." He pulled off his hat. Ariel looked but said nothing. Tiredly, she wondered if he expected her to be surprised. They walked into the house.
"Wait here."
Sunlight streamed through the open shutters, throwing leaf shadow onto the wooden floor. The room was empty but for a plain bench and table of light, sanded oak. Tired and thirsty, she sat down. What had happened out there?
She closed her eyes. She was too tired to think.
He was gone a long time but when he returned he brought food: bread, fruit and a flagon of water. He put them on the table. They ate together.
"You'll have to stay here," he said.
Ariel cut a slice from her apple. "How long for?"
"Several weeks at least."
She shook her head. "No."
"You don't have a choice. If you go back out there, your life is at risk. If you stay here in my house, you do as I say."
"There are other houses in the elf quarter."
"In this matter, they listen to me."

Ariel pondered that. "Tell me why. I don't even know your name."
"You don't need to know."
"If I'm to stay here, what harm could it do? And, if I knew what was going on I might be more reasonable."
"My name is Senduiuiel Cortengren." It sounded like glass in his mouth. "You will find it easier to call me Send."
"You have followed me all the way from Quenelles to Bilbali. Why?"
"We travelled the same route, no more."
"Why did you have to sneak me in to the elf quarter instead of doing it openly? Elven trade used to be too valuable for humans to risk squabbling over the whereabouts of one female." She looked up at him. "But that's no longer true, is it?"
The muscles around his eyes tightened. "You think you know so much."
"But I'm not wrong so far." She leaned forward. "I could help you. By being out there and visible, I could draw attention away from you. If I knew what questions not to ask."
"Why?"
"I have to know why that olla was contaminated. I think you stand a better chance of finding that out than I do. We could both benefit."
He contemplated her with flat, alien eyes. "Eat. Then get some rest. We'll leave tonight."
They travelled on an elven ship. Ariel was glad that she was not expected to crew: everything aboard felt alien, even the ropes were coiled the wrong way round.

There was none of the sweating and cursing, none of the sheer brute struggle to force the ship through the waves she had witnessed aboard the *Rosamund* or the *Genevieve*. Standing on deck, her cropped hair shining white in the sun, her arms and legs brown and corded with muscle, Ariel watched the way the elves sailed their ship and understood why they were the best mariners in the world: the elves knew the sea and loved it. There was no fear.

Send, wearing neither his cap nor the clothes padded to disguise his slenderness, was unmistakably an elf. But it seemed to Ariel that he took

care to avoid the other elves.
"Will we be harbouring in the Magrittan elf quarter?" she asked him.
"No. That option is no longer open to us." He looked out across the ocean. "For years we have sailed these waters carrying goods from the New World to Erengrad, from the southern tip of Lustria to far Cathay, and all we asked in return was our own area in each port to trade from, to govern as we saw fit." He contemplated the horizon. "In Magritta they think they no longer need us: the elf quarter had been declared Magrittan territory; their militia march through it at will and they demand a tithe of everything we trade."
She was shocked. The Magrittans had ignored etiquette centuries old. If the elves withdrew their trade Marienburg, L'Anguille, Brionne, Magritta itself, Luccini... all the major ports of the Old World would be devastated.
She thought back to the way the crowd in the Bilbali fish market had spoken of foreigners, the Magrittan ships in their harbour. "Why are they doing this? They can't sustain it. Surely they don't have the ships or crew to bottle up every shipping lane and every harbour."
"That's what I need to find out."

There was a lot he was not telling her. Aboard the *Rosamund* he had told her he had been working on this for months. She would find out, one way or another.

They sailed out into the Great Western Ocean in a vast loop to avoid the Estalian coastline as much as possible, and it was after mid-summer when Ariel and Send made their way ashore at night carrying enough food and water for the three-day walk east to the deep water harbour of Magritta.
Ariel, wearing a shift and with her short hair dulled with dust, sat in the room at the back of the shop and watched Pilar work. She tried not to worry about how she looked: Send had told her foreign-born slaves were not uncommon in the city. Although it was only two hours after dawn and the sun had not yet turned the air outside to a roaring furnace that dried sweat to salt on the skin, inside it was viciously hot. Sweat rolled down Pilar's meaty forearms as she lifted a fibrous mass from a bucket and spread it over a wire frame which hung by the fire. She took a second frame down and scooped the whitish fibres off onto a solid wooden board. They rustled like hay.
"Now you chop it, and that's carenna flour?"

"Si. Chop then roll. First I put on my scarf." The woman tied a square of bright cloth across her nose and mouth and began to chop. After a while, she laid down the heavy knife and rubbed a little of the carenna between her thumb and forefinger. She chopped some more, then checked the consistency again. Ariel could see a fine white dust rising from the board.
"What happens if you breathe the dust?"
"First time, nothing. Second time, nothing. Sometimes lots of times and nothing. But if the carenna isn't soaked enough times..." She shrugged. "All kinds of things happen. I've seen people who always have to be near the flour. When they're too old to work making the pastries anymore, they shiver, they can't eat, they cry like babies until they can come back and breathe the white dust. But not me." She examined the carenna critically. It was done. She took her scarf off.
"And now you roll it?"
"First we drink a cup of limegrass tea." She looked Ariel up and down. "And you eat one of my pastries. You're too thin." She led her into the back room where it was even hotter. A kettle was simmering over the fires which burned under the three big iron ovens. Pilar busied herself. "How many did you say your mistress wanted? Two dozen?"
Ariel nodded and perched on a three-legged stool. Using the thin end of a long wooden paddle, Pilar opened one of the ovens. Hot air roared out. Ariel felt fresh sweat burst out all over her body and she wondered how Pilar stood it. With the other end of the paddle, Pilar scooped out the pastries.
"Why do you use carenna if it's so dangerous?"
"You must be new in Magritta?" Ariel nodded. "Um. Then you answer the question yourself after you've eaten one of my pastries. Choose."
They were golden brown, still singing with hot air. Each was fashioned into the shape of an animal. They smelled delicious. But it was carenna that had killed Isabel.
"Choose," Pilar said again.
Ariel reached for a delicate golden swallowtail.
"Eat," Pilar encouraged.
Ariel bit into it. The pastry crumbled and clung to her tongue like light mead. Pilar had used only a little fruit in each.

Pilar laughed at the look on her face. "So now you know why. Enjoy it while you can. I make the best carenna pastries in Magritta, and the Magrittans make the best pastries in Estalia. I doubt you'll ever afford to buy one." She handed her a cup of tea. "Unless you buy one of those foul cakes the government workers make on the side after they finish grinding carenna for the navy."

Ariel sipped at her tea, careful to keep her expression neutral. "Carenna for the navy?"

Pilar scowled. "They're fools, all of them. Listen to me girl, if some navy man comes up to you and offers to buy your freedom if you'll come and work for the government grinding carenna, say no."

"Is the work so bad it's worth refusing my freedom to avoid?"

"Worse. Whoever leaches their carenna does a sloppy job. If it weren't such a crazy idea, I'd say it was deliberate. There's no one worker there who could stay away from the white dust now. And," she looked bitter, "more than one person has gone down with twist disease."

Ariel put her cup down carefully. It did not rattle. "Tell me about twist disease." Her voice was cool, calm.

"I'll show you. Come."

Everything seemed very quiet and far away. She got to her feet and put one foot in front of the other. She felt light enough to float as she followed Pilar up steps.

Pilar pushed open a door. The room was dark and cool after the hot iron smell of the ovens.

A man sat propped in a chair. His hands were curled up against his chest, almost tucked under his armpits, his feet were twisted inwards. He was dribbling.

"Nuh."

Ariel could not move.

At dusk, Ariel met Send on the eastern cliff. He was carrying a lantern. She knew now why Isabel had died.

"Did you know," she said conversationally, "that if carenna isn't washed properly it's addictive? In small quantities. If you put bad carenna in olla, then the olla becomes addictive. Start off selling it more cheaply than

uncontaminated olla, which isn't addictive, and almost all olla users will buy the contaminated kind: they don't know it's dangerous." She stared out across the darkening sea. "Then when the price starts to climb, they have to keep buying whether they like it or not. The contaminators get very rich, the *Magrittans* get very rich. The only thing they didn't think of, Send" - the muscles in her neck were hard as pebbles but her voice was quiet - "the only thing they didn't think of was that some people in this world are greedy." She threw a clump of grass down towards the sea. A breeze caught it, pulling it away from the rock. It hit the water and floated. "Most of their customers will die before they spend enough money to make it worthwhile for the Magrittans. They made a mistake."

"Yes. In some ways."

Ariel stared at him. He knew. He had known all along.

"I doubt revenue was the only purpose," he continued. "Escribano likes to kill people, especially people who attend rituals dedicated to Slaanesh. Hence the olla. Khorne has... special enmity for Slaanesh."

Ariel heard the odd combination of bitterness and respect in his voice. She was too tired to care. She felt empty. "I wonder if he even knows she's dead," she murmured.

"I doubt it." He knelt on the grass and took tinder and flint from his pouch. He opened his lantern.

At that moment, Ariel hated him. "Do you care about anything?"

"I care about my life. Which may be threatened if I don't get this lantern lit. The Magrittan militia are looking for me. We have to leave."

"Without finding out your important information?"

"But I did." He struck the flint, tried again. "They've laid the keels for thirty new ships. Thirty. And they floated twelve others less than a month ago. That's why they know I'm here: they saw me in the boatyards."

Ariel did not listen. She found the path down the cliff and scrambled along it.

The path ended in the sea: the tide was coming in. She sat and listened to the waves slapping up against the rock. She knew how Bel had died and why; there was nothing more for her to do. But Bel was still dead and she was... angry. Angry at Send, angry at herself for having begun to trust him, angry at the Magrittans.

And angry with Bel.

She pulled air, cool and salt, through her teeth. Bel had died and left her alone. They had always laughed in the face of the future - marriage, motherhood, loss of freedom - secure in the knowledge that each would have the other to depend on, that they would be together. And now Bel had deserted her.

"How can I face all that on my own?" she whispered to the sea. "Why did you leave me? Why?" She punched the rock. "Why why why?"

She sucked the blood from her knuckles and spat the metallic taste into the sea. Where did she go from here? Not Quenelles. More blood dripped onto the dust by her feet. She ignored it. She felt old and tired. She would go wherever Send was going, then buy passage back to Brionne. There was always the *Rosamund*.

A light winked out from the top of the cliff. Send had lit his signal lantern. What ship would it be this time? She started back up the path.

Through her feet she felt the rhythmic step of many people. The militia. She flattened herself against the rock. Send was still holding his lantern out to sea. He had not seen them; they could be on him before he had time to do whatever it was he had done to those soldiers in Bilbali.

If she called out they would catch her too. She looked up the rock face. If she climbed that instead of using the path, she might not be seen. She felt along the rock until she found a crevice; she pushed her hand in, made a fist and hauled herself up, scrabbled until she found a foothold. With her right fist still anchoring her to the rock, she felt above and to her left. She found another handhold almost immediately. If she imagined she was pulling herself up the mainmast of the *Rosamund* it would not be too hard.

The cliff was not high. She hauled herself up onto the grassy clifftop and lay for a moment on her stomach, listening and watching. Send was still signalling; the militia were creeping closer. He was an easy target for a bow; they must want him alive. From the water, a light winked back. It was what she had been waiting for.

She hit him squarely from behind, wrapping one arm around his arms and a hand over his nose and mouth. Sweeping his legs out from under him, she kicked them both over the cliff and into the water. It was cold and her money pouch was heavy. Although he struggled, she kept her hand clamped over his face until they surfaced. Her knuckles stung.

"Listen!" she hissed.

Shouts of frustration echoed over the water and a torch flickered. Send nodded his understanding, and Ariel let go. She held her finger to her lips and pointed out to sea in the direction of the light that had blinked earlier. He nodded again: with the torchlight dazzling the militia, they would be able to escape if they moved quickly and quietly. They began to swim.

After half a mile, Ariel judged it safe enough to call out. "Hoy!"

No reply. They swam some more. She thought she saw a smudge of deeper darkness ahead. It could be a ship.

"Hoy!" Water slapped into her mouth and she coughed. She was getting tired. Briefly, she considered cutting loose her pouch. Only if she had to. They trod water for a while.

Send called. "Hoy the *Aramam*!"

Ariel heard the distinctive rolling thump of a ladder dropping down the side of a ship. A light flared.

"Aramam?"

"Who else?" The voice was young, laughing. "If you hurry, you'll be in time for dinner. Who is your companion?"

"We'll make the introductions on board, Djellah."

They reached the ladder. Ariel clung to it, too tired to pull herself up immediately.

"Can you manage?" the voice called.

"Yes," Send said, so Ariel did, climbing dripping and exhausted onto the deck of the Arabian dhow.

"Thrice welcome." The twelve-year-old bowed, then grinned. "You look half drowned."
"Thank you," said Ariel.
Send hauled himself aboard. "Where's your father? The Magrittans know I'm here. We need to move quickly."
A figure stepped from the shadow and bowed formally. "Please excuse my sister. All is in hand." She gestured to their growing wake.
"Ariel, this is Cendenai."
Cendenai was her own height, slim and dark. Her hair was as short as Ariel's.
"If you wish, you may exchange your clothes for dry garments before eating. Please follow me." She led them to a cabin door. "Inside you will find a selection of robes. Please join us in the mid cabin for dinner when you are rested." She withdrew.
The cabin was big and the walls tapestried. Brightly coloured robes hung from a rail in one corner. Ariel fingered one. The material was cool and sleek; it smelled spicy, unfamiliar. She let it drop, sat down on a plain wooden stool.
"Where are we going?"
Send stood with his back to her, his hands clasped stiffly behind him. "We're aboard the *Rose of Aramam*," he said tightly, "the private pleasure vessel and sometime trader of an Araby merchant called Hamqa. He has other titles. We are sailing for his port of Meknes."
"What's wrong?"
He turned round. "I owe you my life."
"I needed you to get me away from Magritta," she said coolly. "There was no altruism involved." She watched him absorb that. "Now, why are we heading for Meknes?"
Young Djellah stood up from behind the ottoman. "But we're not!" Ariel looked at her, startled.
Send reached to lay a hand on the girl's shoulder. "We're not sailing for Meknes?"
Djellah said nothing.

"Let her go, Send, you're frightening her." He moved away as she got up from her stool. She took the girl's hand. "Where are we going, Djellah? Do you know?"
Djellah shook her head. "They never tell me anything. But I heard my father talking about it to his steward when they thought I was on deck."
"What did he say?"
Her smooth, olive brow wrinkled. "He said 'We haven't time to make it to Meknes now.' And then something about sending messages to someone about a change of plan."
"When was this?"
"Days and days ago. Weeks."
Send cursed and wrenched open the door, slammed it behind him. Djellah looked up at Ariel.
"You should get changed, you're still all wet." Ariel could not argue with that. Djellah pulled a blue robe off its hook. "This one. It goes with your eyes. I'll show you how to wear it. It's Cendenai's favourite, but she won't mind."
So this was Cendenai's cabin.
The mid cabin was even larger. Silver and glassware on a table set for six glittered in the light of oil lamps. They all looked up as she entered: Cendenai, and Send, and three other men. Send was no longer angry. A large chart lay over the settings. The lamps made it very hot.
"Ah." One of the men stood. He was stocky but not fat, with a wide pink mouth. Hamqa, she guessed. "Welcome to my humble vessel." He smiled and gestured for her to sit. "We are in the middle of explaining to your companion why we are not sailing to Meknes to collect the rest of the fleet."
Ariel sat opposite Cendenai, who smiled slightly.
"Father."
"My sweet?"
"Our guest might feel easier if she knew everyone."
"Ah. Introductions, then. Mademoiselle de Courtivron, allow me to introduce myself and my companions. My beloved daughter, Cendenai, captain of the *Aramam*." He pointed down the table to his left. "Next to her,

Mousaou Salah, captain of my fleet. On my right is Adiffrah el Deheb, second steward."

Cendenai poured Ariel a glass of water and handed it to her. "The first steward stays at home to manage the affairs of my father who is prevented by modesty from introducing himself. Allow me: my father, Hamqa the Divine, Sultan of Aiir, Suzerain of Sadiz and Regal of all Kust."

Hamqa smiled complacently. "She looks well in your robe, daughter."

Cendenai tensed; it was slight but Ariel noticed. She cleared her throat, wondered what the correct form of address was.

"Perhaps, sir, you would grant me the favour of continuing your discussion regarding the course of this ship."

In answer, he gestured at his daughter.

"His Exalted Magnificence," Cendenai said - Ariel smiled her thanks - "anticipated the late arrival of Senduiuiel Cortengren and, fearing the news he would carry, determined to bring forward by a few weeks the plans laid many months ago. Thus, instead of sailing now for Meknes in order to meet with our fleet and send messages both north and west to the fleets of elven and other vessels, we sail south to meet these fleets."

Send pulled the chart round to face them, pointed to the bow shape of the south sea. Ariel was reminded of the dirt under Marya's fingernail. It all seemed so long ago.

"Here to the west, between the Horn of Araby and the southern tip of Estalia, the sea flows into the Great Western Ocean. That should now be blocked off by ships from Marienburg, Lustria and even from Brionne or Bordelaux. They will be sailing west to meet us and the fleet out of Meknes."

"What about the Magrittan ships in Bilbali?"

"They should already have been dealt with."

"I see."

The conversation continued but Ariel sat apart from it. There were strange tensions in the cabin, things she was not being told. She felt alien and unwelcome, Cendenai must have sensed it: she caught Ariel's attention and looked pointedly at the door, raising her eyebrows. Ariel nodded.

"Father, our guest is tired. If you will excuse us, I will take her to eat in my cabin where she can rest."

They met Djellah on the way. "Were they mad that I told?"
Cendenai appeared to consider that seriously. "Not very cross. But you would be wise not to do it again. And now, little one" - Djellah made a face - "make amends by telling Marrokh that we wish to eat in my cabin."
"Can I eat with you?"
"Not today. We have things to discuss." Djellah opened her mouth to protest. "Things arising from your indiscretion." Djellah went to find the cook.
Without the lamps, Cendenai's cabin was dark and cool. The food arrived on their heels: an enormous tray of spiced vegetables, fish in delicate rolls, fluffed rice and flat bread. Cendenai lit a thick yellow candle which she covered with a multi-faceted glass. The walls glowed with refracted colour that drifted with the candle flame.
"You have questions," Cendenai said, heaping a platter with rice and vegetables. She handed it to Ariel, began loading a second for herself.
"Several. First," she hesitated, "why did your father's remark about the robe I'm wearing make you so angry?"
Cendenai's skin was dark and the room not well lit but Ariel thought she blushed.
"It has been a custom amongst the male line of the suzerains of Sadiz that the woman from their harem who last had sexual congress with the husband wears an item of the husband's clothing to show her status as favourite. My father's remark is his way of reminding me I'm a woman and should stick to... women's ways."
Ariel thought about that for a while, then it was her turn to blush. "You captain his flagship," she pointed out.
"Only for as long as he allows it. He can take it away from me any time. He likes to remind me of that."
"Will he?"
"No. I'm one of the best he has" - Ariel could imagine that - "and in his way, he is proud of me."
They ate in silence for a while. Ariel thought about her own future as the unmarried daughter of Bretonnian merchant aristocracy. Her money pouch lay heavy against her skin underneath her robe. Cendenai's robe.
Djellah burst in. "Send and Mousaou Salah are shouting at each other!"

"How many times have I told you not to run in here without knocking?" Ariel recognized Cendenai's response as automatic. She was reminded of Bel. "And don't steal food from a guest's plate." Djellah stuffed a piece of fish in her mouth and grinned at Ariel, who smiled back. "What are they arguing about this time?"
"Something to do with magic and corn."
Khorne. Ariel felt her nostrils flare. She touched her knife.
"… and they're not really shouting. But Send's angry, you can tell. I think Mousaou Salah's scared of him," she finished doubtfully.
Ariel nodded. She remembered Send's soft voice when she had caught him with her knife. Angry, the elf would be terrifying.
Djellah recovered her exuberance. She cocked her head, looked Ariel up and down. "I said it would suit you," she said slyly and disappeared through the door.
"Do you have sisters?" Cendenai said as she closed and bolted the door.
Ariel nodded, unsure of her voice. "She was called Isabel."
And there, for the first time, sitting in the rich colours of the candlelight and wearing another woman's clothes, Ariel was able to talk about Bel.

Behind the *Rose of Aramam* the setting sun stained tattered cloud bloody. The evening breeze was cool and strong, canvas bellied. Hamqa and Djellah were safe below; on the foredeck, Cendenai talked quietly to the two women loading the arbalest with arrows. Ariel stood aft, watching the fleet. Here and there among the graceful elven ships and the lateen-rigged Arabians, she was able to pick out the sails of an Empire or Bretonnian craft. She wondered if the *Rosamund* was among them. In the middle of the fleet floated fourteen ships crewed by cloth dummies and a handful of sailors. Fireships, Cendenai had told her.
They hung five miles outside the Magrittan harbour. The Magrittans were nowhere to be seen.
Mousaou Salah raised his eye-glass and scanned the water. "What are they up to?"

"Escribano is not... predictable," Send said. Ariel noticed that he was wearing multi-coloured studs in his ears. It was the first time she had seen him wear ornament of any kind.
"I don't want to hear any more talk of mysterious Powers and magic," Salah murmured, still scanning. "This is plain naval warfare."
Send said nothing. Ariel remembered his talk of Khorne and Slaanesh, the soldiers in Bilbali.
"Sweet god!" Salah jerked the glass from his eye, then lifted it again. "I don't believe it." He passed the glass to Send. "They're still in the harbour. The whole fleet. Like sitting ducks." He offered the glass to Send. "Has Escribano gone mad?"
"No," Send said without bothering to look through the glass. "He wants something other than 'plain naval warfare'."
To Ariel, it seemed that something in him tightened, like a rope going taut under the strain of a sail in a full wind. Cendenai noticed the disturbance. She came over.
"It's as you feared?" she asked. Send nodded.
Mousaou Salah looked from one to the other. "I can do nothing?"
"Do as you see fit," Send said. "I'm no strategist. But the real battle will not be won with ships." He walked back a few paces, looked directly at Ariel. "Please ensure that no one approaches me until this is all over." He sat down cross-legged and closed his eyes.
"I can't believe that what we do isn't important," Salah said to Cendenai. He reached a decision. "Captain, I want you to prepare your crew for an assault on the harbour. And send me someone who knows mirror code."
Messages flashed to and fro and on every deck, people scurried about like ants whose nest has been poked by a stick. Ariel seemed to be the only one doing nothing. She found a bucket and drew seawater. At least she could damp everything down.

Meanwhile, the fleet altered its configuration: those possessing balisters and mangonels came to the fore; those like the *Aramam*, with only arbalests, were to stay behind the others and discharge their bundles of arrows from behind the protective hail of stones and burning naphtha offered by the

others. The fire ships lay behind them all, hidden. The fleet put on more sail.

Ariel had nothing to do now but watch. The massive cliffs of the Magrittan harbour loomed and she questioned the wisdom of approaching so closely: surely the Magrittans would have those high overhangs fortified. But the cliffs appeared deserted. At the wheel, Cendenai looked calm. Send still sat with his eyes closed, breathing deeply. Ariel began to sweat.

The front ships lay within the jaws of the cliffs and still the Magrittans made no move. Ariel could see the anchor chains of one vessel glinting in the last of the red sun. Others had no sail set at all. Instead of being reassured, fear dried her tongue and swallowed the air in her lungs. Her hands hurt: she was gripping the rope handle of the bucket like a life line. She bent and put it on the deck, then took position near Send.

Mousaou Salah called something, but her hearing was muffled by fear. A mirror winked. All across the fleet tiny points of light bloomed as torches were lit. For the naphtha. They continued forward.

In the harbour, there was frenzied activity aboard some ships. Nothing aboard others. Mousaou Salah grinned, a fierce, tight grin.

"Some of them at least are beginning to realize that there'll be more to this engagement than the muttering of spells."

"They seem confused," Cendenai observed. The ships which had dropped anchor and set sail were moving off in different directions.

Salah lifted his glass and watched for a long moment. "Some of them have decided that Escribano and his Power friend might need some more, ah, material help and are following orders of their own. Let's add to their confusion. How fast is this ship?"

"One of the fastest."

"And the other arbalest carriers?"

"Most are the faster, lighter vessels."

"Good. How do you fancy risking a pass alongside one of those?" He pointed at one of the vessels raising anchor.

"What does it carry?"

Salah raised his glass again. "Naphtha. But I doubt it's been heated ready, and if we pass at right angles and at sufficient speed their chances are small."

Cendenai watched the vessel creeping away from the harbour under half sail. "It should be safe." She turned the wheel several degrees to port, then called her second mate to take it. Standing amidships, she began calling out orders.

Salah conferred with the signaller. The mirror winked again. Several ships nosed ahead of the rest. Ariel loosened her knife in its sheath and hoped Cendenai would move to a more sheltered position before they came within range of the Magrittan.

Everything came into sharp focus for Ariel. Ahead of her, the hardwood mast glowed in the deep red polish of the sun; the air was clean and sharp with land-meets-sea smell, over that lay the heavy, oily naphtha; she could feel the grain of the wood beneath her feet. Her blood beat in her ears. She could die out here.

Like a bird of prey, they stooped toward their victim. Cendenai chopped her hand down, and the arbalest rattled its load of death up at the sky. She barked a command at the steersman, and the *Aramam* heeled over in a vicious turn. Ariel heard the water hissing against their hull.

The Magrittan had her naphtha lit and two figures on deck were manoeuvring the balister into position. One of them dropped to the deck with an arrow in his thigh.

The women by the arbalest had two more bundles of arrows in place. Cendenai chopped again. In reply, the Magrittan loosed her balister.

A ball of black and flame arced from their deck. Ariel watched it. It was going to overshoot. Cendenai shouted for the steersman to pull the *Aramam* into an even tighter curve, out of the Magrittan's line of sight. Another ball of fire streaked into the air, flame streaming behind it like a comet's tail as it fell towards them out of the sky. They almost made it; the comet's tail caught the taffrail behind Send. Ariel threw one bucket of water onto the planking around him and ran with the other to the burning taffrail. The water hit the naphtha with a cracking, steaming hiss and the rail bubbled.

The fire seemed out but Ariel drew another bucket of water to be sure and dumped it over the mess. The residue would have to be scraped off.

Send sat with his eyes closed, water pooling by his feet. He did not move.

The *Aramam* was well out of range now and the Magrittan lay dead in the water, over half her crew injured or killed by their rain of arrows. The crew of the *Aramam* laughed and clapped each other on the back. Ariel stood there, the bucket still in her hand. She was glad she was not dead. Cendenai smiled up at her, then shrugged and looked around the *Aramam*.Ariel understood: the ship was Cendenai's responsibility; she could not come to Ariel yet.

"We only lost one," Salah crowed, pointing to where orange flame licked and sucked at a lateen-rigged vessel to starboard. "Pull back. We'll blockade the rest and send the fireships in."

The skeleton crews on the fireships set full sail and tied the wheels in position. They opened stopcocks on barrels of oil in the hold and doused the decks with it. Then they dived off and swam to the nearest ships where they were hauled aboard, leaving the floating bombs to their crews of stuffed dummies. One passed so close that Ariel could see the smile a sailor had painted on a white face. Elven archers lit the cloth-wrapped tips of their arrows and waited for the signal.

One of the Magrittans hurled a huge stone from its mangonel in a desperate attempt to sink the deserted ship coming directly toward it. Salah smiled. They had left it too late. He murmured to his signaller and the mirror caught the last bit of light from the sun. A triple handful of arrows soared towards the fireships. The first ship lit with a soft *whump*.

Ariel turned her face away from the heat and the rattle of arrows as they rained onto the escaping vessels. She no longer cared that the man who sold the olla which had killed Bel was somewhere on one of those ships that roared and crackled and fell into the water. She wished it was all over. A buzzing in her ears muffled the shrieks of sailors burning to death.

The buzzing became more insistent. She shook her head to clear it. It got louder, like bees swarming somewhere nearby.
Send stood up. "Stop," he said. The buzzing faltered then resumed. He looked at Ariel. "Tell Cendenai to stop."

The *Aramam* hove to. Send turned to face the harbour over the starboard rail. The ship fires were dying but the red glow over Magritta grew. The *Rose of Aramam* lay alone, unprotected. The buzzing grew to an angry hum.

Djellah came up on deck, her hands to her ears. Hamqa followed.
"In the name of the gods, Senduiuiel," he cried running across the deck to where the elf stood as if he had not heard, "stop this!"
Ariel stepped in front of him. "Your Magnificence."
"Get out of my way."
"He requested that none approach him until it was all over."
He tried to push past but she barred his way. "Out of my way, woman."
"Your Exalted Magnificence, I cannot."
He pulled his dagger free from its jewelled sheath. "I haven't time to argue."
"Nor I." She slid her own knife free. For a moment she thought he would attack her, then he threw his knife to the deck.
"I'll have you whipped when this is over."
Ariel ignored him and sheathed her knife. She did not know what else to do. Cendenai, holding Djellah who had her face buried against her older sister's chest, caught Ariel's eye and nodded. She had done the right thing.
Send raised his arms and breathed out, slow and strong. The abrupt silence was shocking. He brought his hands together before him and cupped them. The air around him began to shimmer like a heat haze; Ariel saw it flicker with rainbow colours. The buzzing was replaced by a gentle ringing. The air changed: colour poured onto Send's hands. It seemed to Ariel that he hesitated a fraction, then accepted streamers of mauve and lilac, pink and violet, turning the rest away.
Send raised hands full of amethyst fire and threw his magic free. It skimmed the waves, then soared. The sunset turned lavender. Over Magritta, the red glow deepened to hot ruby. A wind slammed out from the mouth of the harbour and tore over their ships like crazy laughter. Ariel

shivered, even though she knew she was not its target. The edges of the sunset turned back to red.
Send shuddered. Sweat ran from his chin and down his neck. He closed his eyes and began to chant something in Elvish. The sunset shone lavender again, crept across the sky toward Magritta.
In the harbour the water frothed and jumped as though someone in a rage beat at it with a paddle. Ariel thought she could make out a huge figure that reached down and picked up the Magrittan ships like toys, crushing them, dropping the pieces back into the water. It slashed at the remains in a frenzy, then turned its attention outward, and howled.

Send fell to his knees. The surge passed over him, over the *Aramam*.
"Help me up."
Ariel was afraid to touch him. Send gave her a weary, bitter smile. She felt ashamed, but her fear outweighed her shame. He pulled himself to his feet.
"It's done. Look."
Above them, the amethyst deepened and solidified, took on substance. It laughed, and Ariel was reminded of the statue in the clearing on the night of Bel's death. The two figures filled the sky.
"The Greater Daemons of Slaanesh and Khorne will finish this fight without us."
Ariel had travelled with this sorcerous elf, shared food with him. She backed away.
Overhead, the colours clashed. The sea heaved; an enormous wave rolled outward.

Cendenai had seen the danger. The *Aramam* came about to face the wave head on. It slid under her bow, gentle as a hand under a lover's back. Then dropped them. For one heart-stopping moment as they plunged nose down, Ariel thought they would fall until they reached the sea bed, but the bow strained up, up and the *Aramam* righted herself. The wave raced away southwest.
"It might catch the Horn of Araby," Cendenai remarked. She looked over at Mousaou Salah who was pale with shock, then at her father, and beckoned the signaller. "I'm ordering the fleet away."

They would have to use flags this time, Ariel thought irrelevantly. She craned her neck to look at the sky. The two figures were high above them and moving higher. Red flashed, then mauve.
Djellah ran over, but even she stopped several paces from Ariel and Send. "Who'll win?"
"Neither," Send said. He was pale, and still shaking slightly. "Neither is stronger than the other. They rely on us mortals to fight most of their battles."
"Why did he" - she pointed upwards - "destroy his own ships?"
"To Rhug'guari'ihlulan, the Bloodthirster of Khorne, it doesn't matter who dies. Blood and death are like... food." His voice was harsh with fatigue and the knowledge that those who might have counted themselves friends now feared him as much as, more than, they feared the Magrittans.
Djellah looked back to the Magrittan harbour where nothing floated but a few scraps of wood and pieces of sail. "Not a good ally."
Ariel spread honey on her breakfast bread, and took a bite. She was wearing Cendenai's blue robe. Cendenai poured spiced fruit tea for them both.
Djellah burst in. "*He's* leaving."
Ariel knew she meant Send. "He's not waiting until we reach Meknes?"
"No. He's taking a boat and just... going. Can I have a piece of bread?"
"Um? Surely." She handed her a piece. "I wish he'd come to say goodbye." Then she wondered if that was true.
"But he did," Send said from the doorway. "May I join you?"
Cendenai leaped out of her chair and Ariel reached for the knife she no longer wore at her hip. Send watched. Ariel took a deep breath, forced herself to be calm. Cendenai reseated herself.
He was not wearing his multi-coloured studs, and the lines by his mouth were deep. His eyes were dark-shadowed.
"I'm sorry," Ariel said, and hoped he understood.
"I think," he said slowly, "that there are times when I don't like being a wizard." He looked at them steadily.
Ariel wondered if he was thinking of the fact that now he had publicly summoned a Greater Daemon of Slaanesh he was outcast, shunned by elven society. He would never be able to sit at breakfast like this, with family and friends.
"Why did you do it?"

Send must have heard the question behind her question. "The way of Chaos is like a snowball rolling down a mountainside. After a while, what began as a piece of fun started in boredom has become a juggernaut too huge to stop. It rolls until it breaks up against rocks, or smashes the village below." He touched one long finger to his breastbone. "Now my juggernaut is too great to stop. I try only to steer it to where it may do the least harm, and perhaps some good."
Ariel glanced at Cendenai.
"I came here," he said, "to say goodbye, and to tell you... I'm sorry your sister died."
Ariel bowed her head, then lifted it again. "What will you do?"
"Travel."

For a moment, Ariel caught a glimpse of that alienness she had first noticed aboard the *Rosamund*. Suddenly she understood what his life must be like, moving from one place to another, pitting his strength against Chaos. One day, his strength would falter. She looked at Cendenai again, then back to him.

"We intend to travel too." She wanted to share something of her life, if only her plans, with him. "Cendenai and I intend to start a trading line, independent of our families."
He smiled. It was the first time they had seem him smile. "River and coastal trading?"
Cendenai shook her head. "Cathay, the Southlands and the New World."
"I wish you both much luck." He stood and bowed. "My boat will be ready. It has been an honour meeting you."
After he had gone, they were quiet for a while.
"You didn't mention Helseher," Ariel said. Djellah was eying the bread. She gave her a piece.
"No. We're not sure he'll agree."
"He will. He and Marya are hungry for the ocean again."
And he knows that two ships offer more security in a harsh world, Ariel thought to herself. She remembered she and Bel swearing always to take the

other's side, no matter what. She looked over her cup at Cendenai. Nothing seemed so bad when there were two of you.
"Can I come too?"
"When you're older, Djellah, when you're older."
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